



A Widow's Story

Joyce Carol Oates

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Unlike anything Joyce Carol Oates has written before, *A Widow's Story* is the universally acclaimed author's poignant, intimate memoir about the unexpected death of Raymond Smith, her husband of forty-six years, and its wrenching, surprising aftermath. A recent recipient of National Book Critics Circle Ivan Sandrof Lifetime Achievement Award, Oates, whose novels (*Blonde*, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, *Little Bird of Heaven*, etc.) rank among the very finest in contemporary American fiction, offers an achingly personal story of love and loss. *A Widow's Story* is a literary memoir on a par with *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion and Calvin Trillin's *About Alice*.

A Widow's Story Details

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From Reader Review A Widow's Story for online ebook

Rachel Aranda says

This is quite a complicated book to review as it deals with one woman's emotional journey from when she first thinks about how she and her husband could have died until the point when her husband does die and her fear becomes a reality.

The strongest part of "A Widow's Story" are the emotional connections that we all have when we lose someone we love. While I haven't lost my romantic partner to death (knock on wood and thank goodness) I have lost quite a few people who have helped shape me into the person I am currently. A lot of what Mrs. Oates-Smith writes about I understood. Noticing how we could have skipped "minor things" (like eating and sleeping) in order to spend time with our loved one. Leaving and entering areas that they used to be in and how it rips a part of your heart and soul with how unnatural it feels doing this. There are other moments throughout this book had me shaking my head up and down at how I've done the exact same thing. I understand that there are moments that a person doesn't want to share but I feel like there were emotional parts missing at this book. It would have been nice to have had Mrs. Oates-Smith share just a little bit more of her emotions instead of giving us a play-by-play of her thought process. In my opinion, you need to mix your thoughts and emotions together in order to fully share in your writings when writing a memoir, and this book just didn't do that well sometimes.

Even though the emotional side is taken care of I felt that the writing wasn't the best that I've read. It's a memoir about one of the most difficult thing to ever go through so I feel like I can give a small break about the writing. Still this is an established author so I feel like the writing shouldn't have been as blunt and sometimes harsh as it should have been. Again this might have been due to what I wrote about how Mrs. Oates-Smith tended to write her thoughts more than emotions.

Amanda says

This is the story of how novelist Joyce Carol Oates lost her husband unexpectedly to a secondary infection he acquired while in the hospital. She was 70 (?), he was 77.

I have a lot of mixed feelings about this book. I read the first half quite quickly; it was highly emotional, and highly engaging. Around the half-way point though, it was simply exhausting and redundant, even melodramatic. It may sound caustic and unfeeling, but her voice is SO highly charged that it began to sound as though she were screeching her way through the narrative, and at times it was difficult to take her seriously.

I'm surprised that Oates wrote this book, because it is not very flattering. Her grief is such that it cannot be considered normal or natural. Rather, it stems from a co-dependent relationship that left her unable to function as an individual, separate and apart from the entity that was "Ray-and-Joyce" for nearly fifty years. This book would actually be a very useful case study of co-dependency, the inability to distinguish where one person ends and the other begins. What's so sad is that Oates doesn't see this, and chose to share it with the world. It exposes her too much, I think, and I felt embarrassed for her.

If you know the rest of the story, you know that Oates remarried less than a year after her husband's passing. This, too, speaks volumes about her lack of self-efficacy. I saw a piece in Newsweek a few weeks back where well-known people, including Oates, were asked what they thought of some new gadget. It was not

insignificant that she replied, "My husband Charlie . . ." She seems to define her experience through her relation to another, her intimate "other." It's no wonder, then, that when "my husband died; my world collapsed," as she writes early on in the book.

This book also supports a theory that I have that when people who live blessed, near-perfect lives get older, they have a much harder time coping with any sort of setback or loss that life sends their way. They have never honed the vital skills of resiliency and resourcefulness. They simply don't know how to survive the storms of life that others have weathered time and again.

Clay says

I requested a galley of Joyce Carol Oates' "A Widow's Story, a Memoir", because, as an author who was also some years ago widowed, I thought it might speak to me, and it certainly has, in more ways than I could ever have imagined.

There are a lot of grief books, a number written by widows, but none tells the raw truth of grief and loss like this one, how close to insanity grief feels--is, perhaps--and for a very long time too; how savage, precarious, shattering and lazy grief is, until, at some time--which can hardly come soon enough/takes what seems like forever--grief attenuates, or usually attenuates anyway, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the widow.

The great irony is that I could hardly have read a book like this one when I was going through my own loss, quite different than Ms. Oates' and yet in many ways much the same. My concentration was wrecked. I couldn't read much of anything for a very long time. But I think for those who can read it, whenever they are able, it will ring both terribly and comfortingly true. Aside from Ms. Oates' personal story, this seems to me also an important book, because what it says, among so many other things, is: This is the harrowing way grief is, how you and those around you will be and feel and behave, for better or worse, sometimes much worse. Hardly anyone tells you this, or even knows it to tell you, and it's important information, news I received gratefully years ago, when a few knowing people were good enough to tell me.

I am a dozen years past the worst of my own experience and happily remarried, but even so, I've lost several days reading this ARC, nodding, crying Yes!, shaking my head, laughing, empathizing, turning to my new(ish) husband to say: This is exactly the way it was!

Highly recommended.

Laila says

Kadıköy Kitap Günleri'nde aldığım, bir süredir okunacaklar rafında bekleyen kitaptı. Dul Kadının Öyküsü.

ilk birkaç sayfayı okuduğumda, "acaba yazarın gerçek yaşamında benden geçenleri mi bu yazdıklarını" diye düşünüp biraz araştırmaya başladım. Okuduklarımda üncemi doçruladı.

2008 yılında zatürreye baki komplekslerden yitirdiğimin ardından iç dünyasını tüm çaplakıyla kaleme almış JCO.

Di?er an? romanlardan fark?, yaz? sanat? ve edebiyat üzerine bir yazar?n dü?ünce geli?imi ve hayatta kar??la?t?klar? üzerine ???k tutmas?. Zira JCO baz? bölümlerde geçmi?e giderek ya?am?n?n ücra kö?elerini göz önüne sermi?.

?cerikte okumak isteyebilece?iniz çok say?da kitap önerisi de var. Diğer yazarlar?n sanatsal duru?lar?ndan bir ?eyler de yakalayabiliyorsunuz. Bu ba?lamda da çok keyifliydi.

26 sayfaya yer imi koymu?um. Bunlardan bir kaç? ?öyle:

Syf 105: "Belkide onu hiç tan?yamad?m. Belki gerçek anlamda hiç tan?m?yorum kocam?. Çünkü kocam? - onun bilmeme izin verdi?i kadar- tan?yorum."

Syf 118: "Tek ba??nal?kta bir korku var, yaln?zl??n kendisini de a?an bir korku."

Syf 123: "Bizler dil kullanmaya ba??ml?y?z, ak?l sa?l??m?z için."

Syf292: "Ac?y? bir hastal?k gibi dü?ünmeliyim, Atlat?lacak bir hastal?k..."

Sevdi?i birini yitirmi? bir insanın hayat? nas?l etkilenir, neler dü?ünür anlamak ba?lam?nda çok keyifliydi.

Hayat?m?zda önemi olan birilerini yitirmeden okuyabildi?im için mutluyum.

Charles Bechtel says

Read in one sitting. I was struck more as a writer than as a widower, something I daily dread becoming, by this idea: a primary repetitive act of any novelist is to invent, word by word, sentence by sentence. Failing the power to invent, a novelist may turn to what she can recall and massage that until she has what will stand in for what she wanted invented. One of the most striking characteristics of Ms. Oates work is that she invents so often, so well, and so clearly. Looking over how much she has put onto pages it seems almost impossible to imagine she even *had* life to mine, for she must have spent almost the whole portion of it at a keyboard or holding a pen.

Then comes this book. From first to last, nothing is invented. I am sure of it. Nothing has the tinge of cleverness that even the greatest of fiction writers can expunge from their work. Nothing seems massaged, nothing reworked, nothing hardly even processed by the kind of cogitation one puts words through before allowing them to remain on the page. Every word, memory, description seems to hit us like blood drops from a wounded beast who will die, will not recover, will not ever again run. And now that I have read this, I can feel my own blood pumping, hear the circadian rhythms of my own life in my ears, and can't help but feel acutely *temporary* as I sit across from my wife, who reads a fantasy in a chair opposite me.

This is not a book into which we disappear, which is mostly the point of all fictions. Into this I appear. I am too faint of heart ever to read it again, and too fearful I may one day live it.

Kathy says

Since this is a memoir it is difficult to separate the author from the quality of her writing. Perhaps this is a

well written book. But as a person I could find nothing about her to respect. I do believe her loss was the greatest pain she ever suffered but I do not believe her pain supercedes all other pain anyone else has suffered by being widowed, divorced or being alone. I found her to be weak, oh so needy, a name-dropper, completely self-absorbed, disdainful, mean-spirited and rude.

For me the most offensive part was the section she devoted to ranting and complaining about any kindness extended by others. She was offended and completely undone by any verbal expressions of sympathy offered. She lets us all know that many of the flowers, food and gift baskets ended up carmmmed in her trash cans. She complained because the trash cans were so full she couldn't get the lids on and about the burden of having so many dead flower petals on her dining room floor. She shuddered whenever she saw another delivery van coming to her door. She is even burdened by all the sympathy cards she received. They were stuffed in a tote bag unopened. Later when she tried to read them she just couldn't bear to.

In less than a year after her husband died she has remarried.

Reading her memoir was like spending a large chunk of time with a woman I neither liked nor respected. I was glad when the ordeal was over.

Amy says

I must admit, I do take a bit of an issue of a book like this being rated and ranked, because it is a tale of pain as Joyce Carol Oates comes to terms with her grief, finding herself now alone, without her lifeline. How can one rate and review the pain of another and how another grieved? Particularly, or maybe especially, if one has not suffered a terrible loss themselves? Despite whether people feel she was being mean-spirited, disjointed, or maybe even a little cold, people react to loss differently and even if there is a common loss shared between two people, the way they experience that loss is always going to be different. In reading reviews for this book (on both GoodReads and Amazon), I found some of the projections that people were making on how they would handle things in comparison to how JCO dealt with her grief a little disturbing and, at times, without any real merit.

Although I have not suffered the death of a spouse, I have lived through the death of a child and of both of my parents. While reading this book, I was able to really connect with JCO as she traveled the long and lonely world of grief. The grief she writes about, her actions, her disbelief, the feelings of being numb, of feeling lost, of not knowing what to do, of trying to move forward and of being cemented to the ground, anchored because you are afraid if you move on, you will forget -- is amazing, heartbreaking, and true to life. Trying to decide where to bury someone, what kind of ceremony it should include, having to navigate through the paperwork, dealing with people who haven't experienced what you just had, and not really feeling like things have changed, knowing they have, and not being able to deal with them -- this is what death is like for someone left behind.

And trying to find the way to cope: whether it is through writing, getting on the internet and meeting total strangers, going back to work right away, or trying to just find a way to make it through the day.

While I have always been a fan of JCO's fiction, this book humanized her, in all of her good qualities and bad, in her triumphs, trials, and complete failures.

The things she recalls about certain days, the small details like getting a parking ticket, the way the nurse looked at her, the cats misbehavior - I related so well, because those are how you mark the days. It is with those small details that when everything else feels so surreal, you are brought back to reality and realize the

loss really happened, you are really experiencing this, and this is really your life.

I highly commend JCO for sharing that vulnerability with others. Grieving and death is looked upon oddly in our society, especially in comparison with other cultures, and for JCO to be very honest about it, to not romanticize about it, and to say, "Hey, I'm not ok. This has left me lost. What do I do now?" is refreshing. This book, along with C.S Lewis' A Grief Observed, are probably the most honest books about life, love, death, and loss.

I highly recommend reading it without prejudice and projection, especially for those that have experienced a loss of their own. It is hauntingly comforting.

Kimber says

Extraordinary description of a wife's grief after the unexpected death of her husband. Reading this was immensely compulsive, could not put it down. More because of Oates' writing style, she is so readable and she makes the slightest most ordinary event of profound interest. It's a more expansive memoir than as something that could be of consolation to others going through the same experience. It is more about JCO and what she is like as a person. After reading "them," I couldn't help feeling like "Who could write like this?" and "What is this person like in real life?" This book answers some of those questions. Although she was consumed by grief, we can still learn about how someone copes during that time. But I wasn't expecting that she would have so much self-castigation and self-loathing. It really came as a surprise to me. I guess I thought she must be this confident woman who is such a great writer, I wasn't expecting her to have such low self-esteem. I She even blames herself for his death in some instances, which didn't make sense to me. I mean, she couldn't prevent what happened. She really is hard on herself. As with her dark characters, Oates allows herself to be fully seen here, warts and all, and she does have a great deal of inner negativity. I suppose that makes sense-- for being able to write her themes one would have to be at home with those feelings so to speak. She has quite a dark side. She doesn't sugar coat anything. She even admits her pill-popping habits and suicidal thoughts openly and without shame.

But, she is a straight up intellectual, as can be expected from a Princeton University professor. She is not someone to have much spiritual feelings or awareness, which is how I see death and this experience (of communing after a death). I feel that the more depressed she was, the more disconnected from her husband she was. And that this depression was alleviated somewhat near the end, when she was able to "talk" to him. And she was able to move on and remarry but she doesn't really go into that story but stays focused on "a widow's story."

Melinda says

Joyce Carol Oates (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joyce_Ca...) wrote this book after the sudden and unexpected death of her husband, Raymond Smith in 2008 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_...). They had been married 47 years, she was 70 and he was 78. As other writers that I have read, the author uses her writing as a way to deal with the shock of death. She writes very skillfully and with great mastery. If you have ever known a widow, then you will recognize the crushing grief combined with the need to take care of the next task. Copies of the death certificate are needed for everything. Probating the will. Paying the bills. Taking out the trash. Well meaning friends send baskets of fruit and sausage and cheese. People offer to help, but they do not know what the widow needs, and the widow cannot communicate what she needs because of the crushing sorrow she is experiencing. Re-living the final hours. Re-thinking the final decisions.

Writing thank you cards or choosing not to write thank you cards. First conversations with strangers who do not know your husband has died.

While reading this book, it struck me that Joyce Carol Oates must never have had any friends who were widows. Has she never offered friendship or love to someone crushed by sorrow? It seems not. She and her husband had no children, and it seems no close family. Friends did come to stand in the gap, but the majority of her book seems spent in alone times. There is no "where is he now?" or "will I see him again?". Death is final, the end. There is no hope of seeing Ray again, no hope of anything after death. No wonder she is crushed and contemplates suicide.

The irony about JCO is that she is a very prolific writer of fiction, yet her husband Ray never read any of her fiction. None. They were both writers, although Ray left writing to become an editor, and yet she never shared her fiction writing with him. And it seems that he did not share his writing with her either. After Ray's death, JCO pulls out a book that Ray had been writing in the early years of their marriage but never finished. He told her that he had written most of it before their marriage and then set it aside when he turned to editing over writing. She begins to read "Black Mass", and discovers many things about Ray she never knew. The book is semi-autobiographical. Ray was from a very devout Irish Roman Catholic family. He even entered Roman Catholic seminary as his father had hopes that he would become a priest. But Ray has a nervous breakdown and leaves seminary and leaves the Roman Catholic Church and becomes estranged from his family. Ray's nervous breakdown has roots in the treatment his older sister received when she rebelled against the strict Roman Catholic upbringing. She eventually was lobotomized and then institutionalized. Ray witnessed all of this as a young child. Ray also bears the burden of his father's terror of not doing "enough" to warrant entrance into heaven. Ray's father pressures him to become a priest because having a priest in the family would be "good" and that would ensure Ray's father a closer chance of acceptance and approval in the Roman Catholic Church. When Ray rejects this path, his father literally becomes terrified that his salvation is in jeopardy. What a horrible burden of guilt to place on your child! And no wonder he fled from his family. What I feel is most tragic about this is that JCO knew none of this during her 47 year marriage to Ray. She was simply content to accept Ray into her family and never extend friendship or love to Ray's family.

Her success by the end of the book (and I must confess that I skimmed the last 1/3rd of the book, it is almost 400 pages long!) is that she has survived the year after Ray's death. That is the high point of the book. I heard the author say that at some point she wanted to call her book "A Widow's Handbook", but based on her own experience she would not have read it. Then to whom is she writing? I have read other widows and widowers write about their grief at the death of their spouse, and those people seem to have written from positions of hope that lead them out of despair eventually into an understanding of their suffering. JCO points only to THE END. No hope. Her grief has no purpose. As such, why read her book? While she writes well, she instructs poorly. The example she provides is selfish and narrow, grasping merely for survival and accepting that there really is no meaning in her grief. If you must read about life as a widow, there are many other books to turn to that are written just as well (or better) and contain wisdom, something JCO's book has none of.

In an effort to provide a bit of contrast, I thought about books that would be worth reading from those who had been there, and done more than just survive but point to hope. I thought of three people: C.S. Lewis, Kathleen Norris, and Elisabeth Elliot. Here is a bit of information about each person, and the book they wrote to make sense of the grief they experienced.

C.S. Lewis wrote "A Grief Observed" after the death of his wife, Joy. Lewis struggles every bit as violently with his grief as JCO does with hers, but at the end he recognizes that there is something beyond him and his own grief, and in that "something beyond" there is hope. Lewis says, "God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who didn't. In this trial He makes us occupy the dock, the witness box, and the bench all at once. He always knew that my temple was a

house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down."

Kathleen Norris wrote "Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life". (see my review at <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>). Norris is also an accomplished writer, as is Joyce Carol Oates, yet Norris also struggles with the death of her husband yet emerges as more than just having survived.

Elisabeth Elliot wrote "The Path of Loneliness: Finding Your Way through the Wilderness to God". After experiencing the sudden death of her first husband Jim Elliot in 1956 on the mission field in Ecuador when he was murdered, she marries a second time to Addison Leitch and then helps her husband through hard years of agonizing cancer until his death in 1973. Currently married to Lars Gren, Elisabeth Elliot's book on understanding grief comes with hope and joy. (see <http://www.elisabethelliott.org/about...> and <http://www.amazon.com/Path-Loneliness...>)

So seek wisdom from those who have proved themselves wise. I'd avoid foolishness, and thus would avoid Joyce Carol Oates "A Widow's Story: A Memoir".

Jenny Brown says

I could not finish this book. It's another of those books written by someone anointed by the literary establishment who appears to have no sense of humor, no empathy, and no sense of how spoiled and conceited they sound. Oates recounts her husband's unexpected death in a tone that pushes the reader away when they would most like to connect.

One of the perils of being a darling of the literary establishment appears to be that there are vultures there eager to profit from every word that drips off one's pen, including those, like this one, that should have stayed in a box under the bed or been saved for the perusal of a sympathetic biographer.

Joan says

First, I must say that I find JCO's fiction to be too disturbing to read. After reading one of her novels in which a group of teenagers kidnap a random person off the street and proceed to torture him, I figured that there are better ways to spend my time.

However, "A Widow's Story" is the kind of book, a memoir about grief, that I usually devour. My 9 year old daughter died suddenly in 2006, so I usually like to learn from ways that others have dealt with life's big losses.

In this case, I mostly came away thinking that she may be as disturbed as her fictional characters. First, it seems pretty obvious that she is anorexic. Second, her marriage seems to have been quite shallow. How do you avoid talking about anything of substance for 47 years? Third, the book made me wonder if she had a real problem with prescription drugs.

Finally, she seems to never have faced many of life's realities. For example, how in the world could she

NEVER have contemplated the mortality of her husband? He was 77.... Of course, she should be devastated by his death. However, there seems to be no underlying rational thoughts that could have helped her through. Like - "I know it feels hopeless now, but time will pass. I will be able to function more normally at some point in the future."

Overall, she seems like she may have been a "hot mess" all along, and this disruption pushed her into the abyss.

I found the book to be too long and too histrionic. I found her to be unappealing and impossible to relate to. Instead of this book, I recommend "A Year of Magical Thinking" by Joan Didion. Even though Didion is also a famous, wealthy person, I still felt that I could relate to and learn from her experiences.

Janice Williams says

A Widow's Story

Joyce Carol Oates

I am feeling a bit hesitant to write a Review (with a capital R) of this recently published book by Joyce Carol Oates for I am not qualified to critique her writing, only my heart and mind's reaction to the story she has told. With that caveat, I will share my impressions with you.

I purchased this book because, while I am not a widow, I am interested in how people adjust to life-altering situations; how they feel and what choices they make moving forward. Relationships are fascinating to me as well, particularly long marriages, mother-child, and sibling relationships.

I had read Joan Didion's book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a few years ago and it sits with all my "favorites"; so I was curious as to how Oates' book might compare. Not in terms of marriage or grief or circumstance, but in terms of a writer opening her heart and culling from the broken bits of it a story based on an individual's reality as relates to perhaps the most important person in her life.

Right from the start in *A Widow's Story* I loved the words chosen, the flow of the words and the meaning of the sentences. As an editor and reader, I kept finding wonderful sentences that I was tempted to highlight or underline, but did not. I did mark them with a bookmark and share them with you now; this will give you a small glimpse into the content of the book and the style of Oates' writing in this instance.

There is so much more to this book than any brief review can reveal. Like, *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *The House on Teachers' Lane* (by Rachel Simon) and, if I might add, *Leaving the Hall Light On* (by Madeline Sharples and recently published by the company I founded, Lucky Press), *A Widow's Story* is an individual story, a unique story, that is encased within the universal experience of our lives as modern women, often as one-half of a couple, as people struggling to make sense of family, loss, and our choices as writers. These are books to be kept in one's home library and to read again; to share with friends going through similar experiences, to give as gifts.

Here are a few passages that stood out to me in *A Widow's Story* by Joyce Carol Oates (the author uses italics liberally in her writing and I apologize for not incorporating them below, with the exception of book titles, as Goodreads requires cumbersome html formatting just to include italics):

page 74: You made my life possible. I owe my life to you. ¶ I can't do this alone. ¶ And yet--what is the option? The Widow is one who has discovered that there is no option. ... ¶ This determination to manage--to cope--to do as much unassisted as possible--is the Widow's prerogative.

page 122: I am beginning to think Maybe I never knew him, really. Maybe I knew him only superficially--his deeper self was hidden from me. ¶ In our marriage it was our practice not to share anything that was upsetting, depressing, demoralizing, tedious--unless it was unavoidable. Because so much in a writer's life can be distressing--negative reviews, rejections by magazines, difficulties with editors, publishers, book designers--disappointment with one's own work, on a daily/hourly basis!--it seemed to me to be a very good idea to shield Ray from this side of my life as much as I could. For what is the purpose of sharing your misery with another person, except to make that person miserable, too? ¶ In this way, I walled off from my husband the part of my life that is "Joyce Carol Oates"--which is to say, my writing career.

page 141: As I read Ray's critical essays of this long-ago time ["Christabel and Geraldine: The Marriage of Life and Death," which appeared in the *Bucknell Review* in 1968.], I realize how close we'd been ... We had shared every detail of our teaching jobs--our classes, our colleagues, the high points and low points and surprises of our lives... ¶ I am made to think, not for the first time, that in my writing I have plunged ahead--head-on, heedlessly one might say--or "fearlessly"-- into my own future: this time of utter raw anguished loss. Though I may have had, since adolescence, a kind of intellectual/literary precocity, I had not experienced much; nor would I experience much until I was well into middle-age--the illnesses and deaths of my parents, this unexpected death of my husband. We play at paste til qualified for pearl says Emily Dickinson. Playing at paste is much of our early lives. And then, with the violence of a door slammed shut by wind rushing through a house, life catches up with us.

page 221: There's an ironic appropriateness to my presentation [in Cleveland, shortly after her husband's death]--"The Writer's 'Secret Life': Woundedness, Rejection, and Inspiration"--with its focus upon woundedness--especially in childhood. The writers of whom I speak--Samuel Beckett, the Brontës, Emily Dickinson, Ernest Hemingway, Sam Clemens, Eugene O'Neill among others--are brilliant examples of individuals who rendered woundedness into art; they are not writers of genius because they were wounded but because, being wounded, they were capable of transmuting their experience into something rich and strange and new and wonderful. Tears spring into my eyes when I quote Ernest Hemingway's stirring remark--it's so profound, I wil quote it ot the audience twice:

"From things that have happened and from all things that you know and all those you cannot know, you make something through your invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive, and you make it alive, and if you make it well enough, you give it immortality. That is why you write and for no other reason."

page 252: The horror is: one of the books which has been nominated for the [National Book Critics Circle] award is my *Journal: 1973-1982*. Into which--I've just recently discovered--I can't bring myself to look. ¶ How strange it is to the writer, whose life's-blood would seem to have been drained, in order that works of prose be "animated"--given a semblance of life through printed language--when the writer is obligated to revisit the work, at a later time. Sometimes it's a painful, powerful experience--opening a book, staring down at the lines of print and recalling--in the helpless, vertiginous way in which one recalls, or half-recalls, a lost dream--the emotional state of being you were in, at the time of the writing. ¶ In my case--a "posthumous" case--the feeling is But I was alive then! I remember that.

page 360-361: In marriage, as in any intimate relationship, there are sinkholes ... minefields. ...To Ray there was a sinkhole: his family. ¶ The sinkhole was immense, covering many acres: his family, the Church, hell. ¶ This sinkhole nearly pulled him into it, to drown. Before I'd met him, Ray said. ¶ Or so I'd gathered, as a young wife. ¶ ...In writing this, I feel that I am betraying Ray. Yet in not writing it, I am not being altogether honest.

page 361: Another time, when we'd first met ... Ray had spoken hesitantly of his sister who'd been "institutionalized." ¶ This was a coincidence! For my sister Lynn, eighteen years younger than me, had been institutionalized, too. ¶ So severely autistic, Lynn could not be kept at home beyond the age of eleven. She'd become violent, threatening my mother. This was a heartbreaking interlude in my parents' lives, after I'd gone away to college... ¶ But Ray's sister wasn't autistic. ... had not been mentally defective, but shed been-- "excitable"--"difficult"--"disobedient." ¶ Of the four children in Ray's family, Carol had been the rebellious one. ...resisted following orders from her parents ... "over-reacted" to the religious climate of the household. ¶ What did this mean? I asked. ¶ She hadn't been a good girl--a good little Catholic girl. She hadn't been devout. She'd been loud, argumentative. ¶ And what happened to her? I asked. ¶ She was institutionalized. When she was about eleven. Like your sister. But for different reasons.

page 379: It's a fact, a man will love his father--in some way. ¶ Snarled and twisted like the roots of a gigantic tree--these are the contortions of familial love. ¶ Yet even now, if Ray were to return--could I ask him about his father? His family? Would I dare? Or would the slightest frown on Ray's part discourage me, and deflect the conversation onto another subject, as it always did? ¶ As a wife, I had never wanted to upset my husband. I had never wanted to quarrel, to disagree or to be disagreeable. To be not loved seemed to me the risk, if a wife confronted her husband against his wishes. ¶ And now, I am not loved. And what a strange lucidity this seems to bring, like disinfectant slapped on an open wound.

Jannekb says

I've never cared much for her widely lauded, copious fiction, and I care even less for the frail and foolish person Joyce Smith (pen name Joyce Carol Oates) portrays herself to be in this memoir. When her elderly husband, Raymond Smith, dies suddenly of pneumonia, JCO is left utterly unmoored and writes frequently of feeling suicidal, unloved, and without meaning now that her beloved is gone. While she talks a good game about stockpiling pills and lying in bed wishing to sleep and never wake up, after hundreds of pages of essentially the same series of internal dialogues, even a depressive with compulsive suicidal ideation like myself, who was so very likely to be sympathetic to her travails, is left impatiently thinking - build a bridge and get over it already. JCO then proceeds to unearth her husband's unfinished, unpublished, and transparently autobiographical novel "Black Mass" which was written in his twenties (he died in his late seventies), and regurgitates portions and plot summaries to the horrified reader - even selections her husband crossed out and clearly did not intend to include. Raymond Smith was an editor by trade, and by all accounts a very talented one. JCO should have trusted his decisions to excise, to withhold, to NOT PUBLISH THIS NOVEL. In presenting the content of "Black Mass," she boldly and self-righteously airs the dirty laundry of her husband's Roman Catholic family of origin, a family she and her husband were never close to during their long marriage. Of the Catholic Church and its teaching, she writes, "How ridiculous such notions seem to us. To some of us." JCO comes across as rude, dismissive, arrogant, and is frequently demeaning of her friends and acquaintances, many of whose expressions and acts of sympathy were apparently merely annoying to her, but she saves her strongest feelings of disdain for Roman Catholics. "We'd agreed, there is no salvation, as there is no need for salvation. The world, like the garden, simply is." And yet, if she was willing to be saved, to trust in a power greater than herself or her husband or her career, her life might not seem to be, in the end, merely and abjectly casting about in the "infinite whirl, alone." Perhaps this is what Godlessness and an outright rejection of familial bonds creates: meaninglessness. Did she expect her seventy-eight year old husband would live forever? Did she never stop to look ahead, to consider the realities of human existence? We are all going to die, sooner or later. This is not a book of tragedy, or survival of tragedy. It tries to be, in one final sentence, but there was no build to that last, false note - aside from brief moments in her husband's garden, where she believes his spirit resides, but JCO has made it clear that she does not believe in souls and spirits and afterlife, merely the long black silence of not-being. It is not surprising that such a belief system would generate such a long, fruitless, and painfully bitter memoir as this.

Tessa says

The title of this book describes exactly what it is. Joyce Carol Oates takes the reader on a journey through the intimate pain of losing her husband after decades of marriage. Unafraid as a writer, Oates allows us genuine glimpses into her struggle to live through the days of her husband's illness, death, and the following year of her life. I feel like this was a "right place, right time" book for me. I was genuinely surprised by how completely it captured my attention and inhabited my heart. I read the book after reading an excerpt of it in *The New Yorker*. An excerpt that I read no less than 6 times and which brought me to tears each time. Tenderness leaps off the pages. Through its descriptions of the heights of love, it shows that two people can love each other sweetly and loyally through a lifetime together. It also beautifully describes the extreme pain of losing that which you love most and gracefully allows a small look into a grand journey of grief.

Spoiler Alert! Two excerpts:

"As he was revealed to be a born gardener with a gardener's zest for working in the soil with his hands, so he was revealed to be a born editor with a zest for working with writers, nurturing their work and publishing it. Many of his closest friendships were editor/writer relationships forged in the intimacy of letters, phone calls, faxes. ... Editors and gardeners are perennial optimists. No one steeped in a tragic sense of life can be either."

"Essential as it is to be immersed in one's work it is equally essential to move through it, and past it. It's a terrible thing to be devoured by one's work--you must learn to leap free of it as one might leap free of a raging fire."

Aunt says

This book stands alone in searing memoirs. Not only for widows but for anyone that has lost someone who simply cannot be replaced. The most mundane things are simply too difficult to bear and oftentimes well meaning friends make the journey that much harder. The moments that registered for me were the contemplation of an eternal sleep aided by doctors who tend to treat grieving women as raving banshees to be medicated. Then, of course, the endless bargaining with whatever is out there and in control to bring your loved one back -to have them returned to you if only YOU were good enough. From fainting on the floor to developing an absolute fear of the telephone, Ms. Oates has convinced me that she, too, has walked through the valley of death-sadly leaving a cherished loved one behind. And, for some critics who attempt to "shame" Ms. Oates or question her love for her husband because she remarried a year after he died, I ask that you withhold that judgement until you, yourself have walked in her shoes. Clearly, she loves her first husband and perhaps she is fortunate enough to be blessed with the gift of two great loves. Or, maybe she just didn't want to be alone anymore. It is so deadly quiet there.