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Mary Elsie Robertson

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[Music]

PARSHALL: "Our guest is Joyce Carol Oates. Novelist John Gardner has called her an alarming phenomenon who is one of the great writers of our time. In a moment we'll meet her."

[Music]

VOICE: "Brockport Writers Forum presents another in its continuing and exclusive series of discussions with leading literary contemporaries. Here to introduce the participants and guest is the program's host and current director of the Writers Forum, Rodney Parshall."

PARSHALL: "With us today is Dr. Philip Gerber, Professor of English at Brockport, who has written numerous scholarly books and articles, and was one of the founding directors of the Forum. Presently he's editing the conversations with the artists tapes such as the one we're doing now for hardbound publication by the SUNY Press. And also Mary Elise Robertson who is a lecturer and a creative writer whose most recent novel, whose award-winning novel, is being published also by SUNY Press this fall, called "After Freud". And, of course, our special guest is Joyce Carol Oates, novelist, short story writer, literary critic, professor of English, whose most recent book, "Bellefleur", appeared earlier this year and immediately found itself on the "New York Times" Bestseller List. Her accolades are too long to mention but I'll quote a couple of them at least. The National Book Award I think is probably the most coveted award that any creative artist could search for. And she's been nominated more than, well, several times. Joyce, to begin with, I'd like to go back to the quote from John Gardner we opened the show with. I don't know why he called you an alarming phenomenon. Is it "Bellefleur" because, of course, it's from a review of "Bellefleur"? Or is it a reference to your work generally? Or just some hyperbole from another [inaudible]?"

OATES: "Well, John may have simply been referring to a kind of literary journalism that sees anyone who writes very much as being alarming. And I think that's a kind of good natured joking here because he, too, is, quote, "an alarming phenomenon"."

PARSHALL: "I could understand that."

GERBER: "Joyce, I hope you don't mind if I quote you."

OATES: "We'll see when we hear the quote."

GERBER: "All right. But the anthology which we're using in our American Literature course and which contains your story, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?", if that's the title?"

OATES: "Yes."

GERBER: "The quote she was saying, "In the summer of 1972, everything I have done so far is only preliminary to my most serious work.""

OATES: "Mm-hmm."

GERBER: "I wonder if you could tell us how far you have gone into that serious work by now and which of your works may best represent it?"

OATES: "Well, I suppose "Bellefleur" is a kind of summation of a number of themes and I had meant it to be a very experimental novel in terms of using the gothic as a kind of structure for putting in many

things that might ordinarily belong to the realistic psychological novel. And I was fired by a kind of mystic excitement and certainty about the role of art, not simply in my own life, but in the lives of everyone in our culture. I felt extremely optimistic. And that certitude has in most respects stayed with me. I remember writing that and feeling this wonderful sense which I think we all have about our -- ."

GERBER: "It was interesting to hear you refer to it as a gothic novel. And I want to, I want to cite again from you. This is from Linda Wagner's collection of essays in which you did the preface. And you say this that, "Novelists are the most pragmatic of people. How to attain a specific end will quickly become more important than what the end is." And then you point out the James Joyce needing a structure for the novel he had in mind which became "Ulysses", used "The Odyssey" as the structure. And I'm wondering in terms of "Bellefleur" is the gothic the structure that you came upon or is it something else that you came upon that you, as in that pragmatic fashion, for this new novel?"

OATES: "Well, gothic is really a way of pointing toward a methodology where one can bring the internal emotional, the psychological out as it were into a literal stage. That is instead of writing in a realistic mode about vampiristic relationships between people, particularly between lovers, the gothic writer can simply write about vampires and make that in some ways it can be very comic. It's a comic kind of liberation. And why write about vampiristic relationships if one can in fact write about vampires in which eroticism is abstracted and refined and it becomes another mode, another really mode of discourse that is, you drain my life's blood from me literally. And it's very exciting for a writer like myself who's been in the mode. I might call naturalistic, realistic and symbolic. It's really the James Joyce great tradition. It's exciting to feel, well, for one time I will suspend all these rules and do virtually anything I want. But it's all within the general coherence I think of a psychological realism."

GERBER: "This is why you have that little preface in which you say, "This is a work of the imagination"."

OATES: "Right. Right."

GERBER: "I assume to alert your reader."

OATES: "Right."

GERBER: "Who may be expecting something quite different from you."

OATES: "Yes. Yes. I'm glad that you mentioned the Joyce reference because Joyce is a writer's writer. He is the great idol and hero of many of us who write. Not simply for his genius, because in fact he rather doubted that he had genius. He said, "You know, I have talent but other people have more talent. But I, James Joyce, will work very hard." And he did. He worked very hard and created masterpieces that did not really come from suddenly flurries of inspiration such as one finds in D.H. Lawrence. And so Joyce becomes a hero to writers who are willing to put in a lot of years into creating the art."

ROBERTSON: "I was interested to hear last night that you referred to "Bellefleur", you said that you realized after you had written it that it was surprisingly autobiographical."

OATES: "Yes. Yes."

ROBERTSON: "In what ways? Because it wouldn't appear..."

OATES: "Well, it doesn't seem that way. In ways I probably don't want to confess. But I must say that in writing it I succumbed to the obsession and the compulsion of the heroine, Leah, who is building an

empire really against all odds of sanity and probability, to keep on building this empire day by day, and really week after week, and month after month. Feeling that one is at times almost on the verge of crossing over into another realm we might call insanity, that there's something insane about that kind of deep obsession. Also a novel that is so long and so involved, as you may know since you're a novelist, constitutes a contrary world to the world in which we live. And the busier our lives are and the more people who we know who are taking parts of us, I think for psychological balance we must create a counter world that is as deep like the hypothetical roots of a tree are as deep going down as the tree is tall. And this imaginative world will keep us going very well and functioning very well. And if you are a novelist, you probably are doing that sort thing and when you can't do it, then the outer world pulls too much of you and then you become in a way unhappy I think."

GERBER: "This is why you've called "Bellefleur", or you called the gothic novel, I think last night you called it a biography in code."

OATES: "In code, yes. Yes. It can be very exaggerated."

GERBER: "What is the code? Or do you want to say, or what?"

OATES: "Well, for instance, we've all had the experience of someone in our families, or someone who we love very much dying suddenly. And there are obviously ways of writing about this that are very poignant in the realistic mode. You simply write about it. But if you wanted to choose an image for the impact on your life of sudden death, you could choose an image like a great, huge, fabulous bird flying in, taking your beloved away, carrying it off, and you're simply standing there absolutely dazed."

GERBER: "Is that like an earlier age might describe the angel of death?"

OATES: "Exactly. An angel of death."

GERBER: "If you find a new analogy, a new metaphor. Yeah."

OATES: "It's finding a metaphor for something that we all experience but the metaphor is uniquely our own."

GERBER: "Mm-hmm. So really the key to this code remains personal with you."

OATES: "I suppose so and yet I think people respond to it on some level."

GERBER: "But what I meant was, Joyce, but you understand the personal application of the incidents."

OATES: "I do. Yes."

GERBER: "Whereas the reader have only the metaphors on which [inaudible] maybe apply to his own experience."

OATES: "It may -- ."

GERBER: "But you maintain your privacy."

OATES: "Right. Or it may not."

GERBER: "Which is very nice."

OATES: "Many people have written to me about a chapter called "The Spider Love" which is, there's a big, black spider that's on the shoulder of a very beautiful girl. And men have liked that. It was in "TriQuarterly" but I don't think they know why they like it. And it seemed to me as I wrote it, I didn't really think about this because it's no fun to analyze what one is doing, but the spider becomes a living, pulsating, and very horrific symbol of a young girl's defiant virginity, her arrogance, and rather wonderful self-love, and her containment. And this spider gets bigger and bigger and really in a way beautiful but dangerous to the male because it un-mans him. The male has to take that spider and destroy it as he destroys the girl's virginity and then he comes into possession of her. And at the same time I meant it to be amusing. You know, it's not really any kind of sexual drama but really kind of amusing metaphor."

GERBER: "But this virginity metaphor, this is something you had in mind or that the readers are finding?"

OATES: "I had it in mind in a way, in a way."

GERBER: "And so the readers are actually responding -- ."

OATES: "To something strange about it. It strikes a deep chord I hope."

GERBER: "Yeah. Seems to have done that."

ROBERTSON: "Well, in "New Heaven, New Earth" you write of the visionary experience in literature. It seemed to me that "Bellefleur" was this leap into the visionary."

OATES: "Mm-hmm."

ROBERTSON: "It seemed, well, even though there are scenes or things that have occurred in other works of yours, that this is nevertheless a departure. And I felt that there was a sense of a leap into a new, new world here. Did you, is that the way you felt that book?"

OATES: "Well, I'm glad you feel that way. I did. But each novel, each story, or article that we write always seems to us very new. It seems like a departure and perhaps only once or twice in a lifetime is it truly a departure in terms of other people."

ROBERTSON: "Mm-hmm."

GERBER: "We know that "Bellefleur" is a departure but is there also a relationship or an evolution from your earlier work that you feel is important?"

OATES: "Oh, yes. The novel in one sense is an ecological drama about the exploitation of resources and exploitation of human beings by human beings. It's very much a nineteenth century novel, a Gilded Age kind of novel."

GERBER: "This is one thing that struck me in reading it is to how much you had in mind the, well, perhaps the sociological roots of the story of the Astors and the Vanderbilts and the other great fortunes."

OATES: "Oh, yes. Yes."

GERBER: “That this is, becomes a sort of perhaps the epitome of that story, the rise and the fall of the, as these people become so materially rich in land, and goods, and castles that they seem to undergo a kind of moral deterioration.”

OATES: “Yes.”

GERBER: “In the family. And I notice you have one character, a Jedediah, if I'm right, who breaks with the family and becomes a religious hermit, a fanatic of some sort which, and how you feel that fits in with this type of interpretation?”

OATES: “Well, that's where a family being a kind of microcosm of America has both good and wicked characters. And they're not, by all means, all bad. In one sense it's a series of interlocking love stories. You know, it's really, it doesn't have always the sociological burden and weight to it. Jedediah is that part I suppose of oneself that would like to retreat into the mountains. I think we all have this impulse. We'd like to simply become hermitic and reclusive. I know I feel that way, especially after an extremely social and busy week. So, let's say, at Princeton everyone has these fantasies of wanting to simply go away in the mountains. I mean the most unlikely people. And many women identify with Emily Dickinson, women who are shamelessly social, and extroverted, and going out all the time, and enjoying life, secretly they have perhaps a rather perverse identification with Emily Dickinson or someone like that. So Jedediah I suppose is that part of myself. And he must be purged of God in an almost literal way. And he does commit a murder in which reviewers tend not to notice. The murder goes by rather incidentally. It seems part of this whole great tapestry or fabric, you know, of creating one's own empire.”

ROBERTSON: “You say that he's purged of God which is in a way true but I read that is in that he had to see God in a new way, in a way that he had not perceived the possibility of seeing God.”

OATES: “That's right. It's not this theological notion of a presence that's transcendent but something that may be eminent in relations between human beings. Yes. That's good.”

ROBERTSON: “I was interested to hear how this, well, how the novel started, the germ of it, that apparently it came to you as an image of a woman sitting in a walled garden with a baby in a cradle and this was such an appealing image that you wanted to enter that garden and be a part of the scene. How, from that point, can you say anything about the way the novel sort of evolved, how it grew out of that germ?”

OATES: “Well, certainly. Yes. Andre Gide has said that the one thing an imaginative artist needs is a secret world to which he alone has the key. And I teach creative writing and have for many years. I suggest to my students that they work with very personal images that are uniquely their own. These images may arise out of a dream or they may be something that haunts the conscious mind for many years. And we are drawn to these images not knowing why, with the same kind of unconscious impulses that determine our falling in love with certain people, and having really no emotion for other people. So I think if one can begin with a very personal image that quickens the heart, and really these images have such a visceral response in people that you know then that this is your true subject. And simply then to meditate upon it, to think about it, to go for long walks thinking about that image. It seems to blossom outward. It will suggest something that contains it. So I had an image of a walled garden that was slightly disheveled and a mother and a baby in a cradle. Now in Jungian terms I suppose the baby in the cradle

is, would be myself or the creative function in my psyche. And now how to bring this out of the cradle, how to give, since I'm a novelist in a certain tradition how to give the walled garden a place, a locality. Who's president at this time? What's going on over here? What's going on in England? To really set it in place. Then this just requires a lot of thinking and I took notes and had about a thousand pages of scribbled notes. I had a long chart on the wall tracing the fortunes of each character in the novel. And I had a map of the region. I always make maps. Have you done that?"

ROBERTSON: "No, I haven't."

OATES: "Oh. I recommend that."

GERBER: "You do it, you write in longhand?"

OATES: "I write in longhand. I love to write. I love the way -- ."

GERBER: "And then what happens? You go to a typist for a draft?"

OATES: "Oh, no, no. No. I have, I'm very good friends with a number of writers. Susan Sontag is a friend of mine and she had real difficulties writing because her standards are so very high. And so we talk rather endlessly, well, how do you get to the typewriter without feeling despair and malaise? So the way I do is I write, scribble notes to myself on pieces of paper that are folded over. And there's always the feeling that I'm jotting down a sketch for a scene that I'm not really writing because there's a certain puritanical feeling that if one is really writing, it must be good. And students, too, have this problem. So I tell students don't feel that you're really writing at the moment. Tell yourself, "I'm taking notes. I'm jotting down ideas." And go and either on a typewriter or in longhand jot these ideas down. Then when you have 20 pages of this, just spread it out on a table and look at it and you'll feel a quickening of excitement and you'll say, "Here is my first sentence." So you take that out and then you write the first sentence and that becomes a paragraph and then before long you have your first scene. But at no point in the process do you really say to yourself, "Now I will write a great novel or a great short story. I will begin right on page one go through to the end." Because I think that's very inhibiting and any kind of inhibition is paralyzing and crippling to the creative function."

ROBERTSON: "There has to be that sense of play."

OATES: "Sense of play. That's right."

GERBER: "But then you eventually through this process you are producing in a longhand script."

OATES: "And then, well, it can be typed, too, but then you can type it over."

GERBER: "Do you do your own typing?"

OATES: "Oh, yes. I love doing it."

GERBER: "So you produce it."

OATES: "Oh, yes."

GERBER: "And then I suppose it's revision."

OATES: "Oh, yes. I can type a page over ten or more times changing sentences here and there. This is the Joycean inheritance. James Joyce."

GERBER: "There's obviously a great deal of interest in craft on your part."

OATES: "Oh, yes."

GERBER: "You're probably not very sympathetic with formula approaches to teaching writing. Like let's do a characterization sketch. Without the inspiration apparently there's no possibility getting a characterization sketch to be worth much."

OATES: "Well, no. I think that one can assign virtually anything to anyone and it strikes a personal chord. That I can assign character sketches but I never make my assignments compulsory. There are suggestions. The students come in and they have written wonderful things, usually under the guise of saying apologetically that they can't do it. They always will say, "Well, I can't possibly do this." If I ask a student to write in the voice of the opposite sex, I say, "If you can find an opposite sex any longer in 1980, you know, take on that voice." They always say, "Oh, I couldn't. I couldn't possibly do that." But then the next week they come in and the young men have written wonderful monologues from the point of view of women and vice versa. And so there's always this initial feeling I think that we can't do something and then we go and try."

GERBER: "But you hear writers so often who can't let go of a manuscript because it's never finished. You evidently have less problem because you simply must make room for these new ideas that seem to keep crowding in and demanding that you deal with them."

OATES: "Oh, well, I think we all find it very difficult to give up any kind of relationship because it reminds us of our mortality. As I say, I'm friends with a number of writers and when one is deeply immersed in the project, one feels the precariousness of life. One is afraid of dying before it's over with. So writers respond to this in many ways. Some of the ways are so famous, by drinking a great deal, or taking drugs, or being really in this sort of emotional roller coaster that one cannot get off. But when I finish a novel there is a sense that a door is being closed in my own life. It's like moving on month after month, day after day in our human relationships. Door close and we can't go back. And being excluded from a world in which one was very much at home always provokes senses of mortality, and transience, and deep melancholy. And I think as one grows older obviously one makes fewer lifelong friends. When we're forty years old we obviously cannot make friends that go back to high school any longer. And each step along the road of life excludes us from earlier stages. So writing a novel is like doing any project, whether it's knitting an afghan or teaching a class. I mean I've always felt, along with the usual relief that we all feel at the end of the semester, also the sense of the end of something that is irrevocably lost."

GERBER: "And looking forward to the beginning of a new."

OATES: "Well, there's always a limbo, isn't there?"

GERBER: "Mm-hmm. Right. Yes."

OATES: "Where one is almost rudderless, you know, and before the next project takes over with that power. Philip Roth has, who's also a friend of mine, said that it's so terrible to go from the mastery of that manuscript that's finished where you can go through it and on page 115 you say, "I will write the page over and change one word." You know, and you do that and you feel like the God of creation. Then

that manuscript is finished and it's taken away. And then you begin again as if you were crawling on the floor, groping. You don't know what you're doing. You have a mess on your desk. You know that you don't want to get up in the morning because it's so awful. You have no mastery. You go from being God to being a baby. And that plummeting is very difficult. That's why it's hard for people to be married to writers and poets. I think it's very hard for people with whom they live to try to gauge these rapidly ascending and descending moods."

GERBER: "When you close this door, Joyce, on a manuscript, which I presume is when you send it to the publisher, is that door then closed fairly irrevocably or do you do much with proof sheets in terms of revision?"

OATES: "No. You can do revision. But I'm speaking more of an emotional exclusion. I think we come to the end of relationships with other people at a certain symbolic point. After that we may continue to see the people. In some cases we may continue to be married to them. No, these are relationships that are absolutely over with but we hang on and they go on for a while and they atrophy slowly. But there is a moment where you know somehow that you're excluded and you may be the one who walks away but you can't go back. So with any artistic project the same kind of sense of gestalt I think is applicable."

ROBERTSON: "You spoke last night of the difference between the lyric poet and the novelist. The lyric poet who looks in the mirror all the time and the novelist who looks out the window. And you suggested I think that the novelist has something of a difficulty because he/she loses himself/herself in this -- ."

OATES: "In the work."

ROBERTSON: "Right. Do you feel this yourself? If you, you are less important really than this world that you create?"

OATES: "Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I have virtually no interest in myself whatsoever. No. As far as I'm concerned there is this kind of empty blur that must be where I exist and it bemuses me, in a sense it doesn't even interest me, but it bemuses me that other people care, you know, about the writer as a writer. And yet I, myself, am infinitely interested in, say, James Joyce, since we've brought him up, or Chekov, or Henry James. You know, how did they really live and what did they write? But James, of course, would be the first to say, "I am not the focal point. The interest is in the work, not in the person." And yet it perhaps is just a curiosity of personality. I don't know. I would like to get back to a point at which my relationship with my ego was in some way more normal. I think it's very normal to have pride, and to be egotistical, and to care about whether one lives or dies, or eats enough, or whatever. I think that's very normal and good. And through meditation, it was mainly a Zen meditation in the early 70's, I seemed to have lost that thread or that grip upon what makes us mortal in a unique way. Because if you do a great deal of meditation, of course, the goal is enlightenment and freedom from the ego. But I think that can have negative consequences, too, which I won't talk about at this time."

ROBERTSON: "I've noted in your novels, too, you often write about characters who have a rather fragile hold on their own identities."

OATES: "Mm-hmm."

ROBERTSON: "And it seems to me perhaps this was your interest, this was where your interest began in those sorts of characters."

OATES: "Yeah. Well, and I'm also interested in people who travel. We were talking earlier with Phil and Jean Gerber about traveling. Because it's one, when I travel, I truly find this metaphysical paradox that I do not exist. That there really isn't much there except a little vapor of consciousness that's going around and looking at these ruins, let's say, that have been there for 50,000 years and there they are very literally, very physically, and there's a history there, a kind of communal world and this vapor of consciousness that is myself is so, so finite. And it's just blown away so quickly. And when we go to really older cultures and confront that almost totally ego-less world in which artists didn't put their names on anything. We're confronted again and again with the sense of our own Western, capitalistic, modern American paranoia, mania, a frenzy for personal possessions of things that are absolutely impermanent. Like everything's taken from us, our very lives are taken from us so quickly, and yet we have a frenzy in this country for possessions and for the ego."

GERBER: "Why do you suppose that is?"

OATES: "I think it's something to do with our simply historical forces. Something to do with the new world."

GERBER: "'Bellefleur" has something to do with this idea [inaudible]."

OATES: "Oh, yes. I'm very, very concerned with that. A new novel that I finished takes place in Washington and it's about a political assassination. And the characters, two of the characters, a brother and sister, are descended from John Brown. So I think that the whole John Brown business in the late 50's, the evolutionist movement in the United States summarizes an embryo so much that's going on all the time between what we might call the high or a natural law that some people felt they were obeying in the 60's by not going to Vietnam and by demonstrating against Lyndon Johnson that they were disobeying the law in the service of a higher law. And John Brown, of course, spoke so eloquently. He was a very, very mesmerizing speaker. And Henry David Thoreau called him an angel, an angel of light. And Henry Thoreau was a very peaceful man but he said that he could see committing murder. He said, "I don't want to commit murder but if it's necessary that the South release its slaves, then I will commit murder." I find that irresistibly interesting. And I really want to write about that time in America which has so much to do with where we are now and perhaps where we're going."

GERBER: "In connection with that and having to do something with your craft, I wanted to quote from you again, if you'll allow, and this is taken from your novel of "Wonderland" which my students are studying at the present time. And in this you have a character whom you called Trick Monk. At one point he says to Jesse Vogel, I think his name is at that point in the book, and he says, "I don't play tricks. Tricks are vulgar. No. I simply push the logistic of a situation as far as it will go. I exploit the dimension of the possible rather than the probable." And it struck me at that time and I remember originally making a note beside in the margin. Isn't this what you do in your writing to a great extent, is to exploit the dimension of the possible and push the logistics of the situation as far as it will go?"

OATES: "Yes. I'm glad you quoted that. I like Trick Monk and he's obviously a trickster figure. And one really has to have some way of liberating the trickster in ourselves I think in order that we have a sort of psychological health. But in that novel Jesse Vogel, Peterson, Vogel did not have that. He was so very

much in a straightjacket of his profession and the many other things going on in terms of American identity there, that to not have that would be disastrous.”

GERBER: “I found that book a rather hopeful book even though it has a great deal of terrible things that happen in it. But it seemed to me that in the total scope of "Wonderland" we move from the beginning in which a father is going to town in order to fetch his son so that his son will be the last victim in a mass murder and be slaughtered. And we move from there through all of these things that happened to Jesse Hart Peterson Vogel. And we close as Jesse is searching for his child but in order to save her, not to destroy her. I found that a very optimistic, hopeful note in your writing which so much criticism that has come out emphasizes the idea, the negative idea, I think the tragedy of destruction, of fear, of tension, et cetera.”

OATES: “I'm glad you saw that.”

GERBER: “I don't find this note in the sweep of your work, although I find it in pieces here and there.”

OATES: “Yes.”

GERBER: “And in details.”

OATES: “Well, I think you're quite right. And one, after all, doesn't want to write Jane Austen comedies in which a marriage is the high point of everyone's life. And at the same time one doesn't want to write works that are so nihilistic and pessimistic that simply to open the first page is to invite some sort of damnation and so on. I mean really I think serious writers want to do justice to the world out there and at the same time have a kind of structural sense that they're guiding their readers toward some moral feeling of minimum optimism. Minimum optimism. Gore Vidal accused me of being too positive.”

GERBER: “Really? That's the first time I've heard of [inaudible].”

OATES: “That's wonderful.”

GERBER: “Save that quote.”

OATES: “I think it's wonderful. I think he was joking a little bit. He said, "Like most Americans, you accent the positive. I, however, am much more negative." So I wrote back to him and said, "This is the first time I've ever been accused of being positive so I'll remember that with pleasure.””

ROBERTSON: “Well, there is, however, a good deal of violence in your work. And you've written of Flannery O'Connor's work that for her, or for her characters, only through an initiation through violence are they able to see. Now it doesn't seem to me that you use violence in that way in your books, though perhaps you, perhaps I missed something there but I don't see that. But I wonder what you feel your purpose is?”

OATES: “Well, I'd have to think about that question for a while because each novel represents, at least for me, a new departure. The novel that I'm recently finishing which is set in Washington is structured upon Oresteia. There's a brother and sister who are compelled to atone for, to take revenge for the apparent murder or betrayal of a father. And they're going to have to do this by way of punishing their mother. And I suppose, really unlike Flannery O'Connor, I don't see the violence as coming in from the outside and emblematic, but coming from the inside and being necessary. Aeschylus, as we know in the Oresteia, in the trilogy of plays concerned with working out the means by which justice becomes part of

a community. We begin with the "Agamemnon". We go to the "Libation Bearers". And there is incredible and sickening violence. Not on stage, but always off stage. When Orestes is going to kill his mother, Clytemnestra, he can't kill her on stage. That's not a convention. He has to in a way seduce his mother. He's calling to her to get her off stage. He says, "Come, Mother. It's you I want." A very terrifying moment and yet there's no violence at all. So it's the violence of the situation of that savage community in which Aeschylus wants to isolate random acts of revenge and bring them into a coherence that might be called justice. So I wanted to do that set in Washington in 1970's and 1980. And so that really comes first, that is a sense I want to write about a theme I think very important. Then the act of violence near the end of the novel to me was so sickening I could hardly write it. The murder of a mother by her son, it took 500 pages for me to get to that point and I really couldn't sleep well at night. It was an awful time for me to be writing. And finally I just had to do it but I did it in a very oblique way. So I'd say that the violence in that novel is something that I had to do because it seemed to be very much in the air. I'm also consumed with political terrorism."

GERBER: "This is a violence that you're going to be explicit about?"

OATES: "It's not that explicit. It's reported as if it had already happened or something like that. But I'm so interested in political terrorism and we have this predicament in the United States continually of leaders, leaders who seem in so many ways inferior. It's an insult to the American people that we seem capable in some bizarre and maniacal way of having leaders that are so crippled, so blighted, so, in some cases, blatantly hypocritical, or, in the case of Nixon, criminal. How does it happen? And young people are particularly disgusted. The disgust takes the most pernicious form of all which is indifference, boredom."

PARSHALL: "So very strong in your mind is a concept, you know, moral concept, ethical concept?"

OATES: "It's a moral concept, yeah. It's a moral concept."

PARSHALL: "And the violence is the natural consequence of trying to explore this concept."

OATES: "Yeah. Yes. I think that violence is very American in the sense that one has a feeling of paralysis in this democracy. That Tocqueville writing many, many decades ago maybe put his finger on the notion of a democracy being in so many ways stultifying, that public opinion, it's a weight, you know. And that even in a way nonconformity is much less tolerated in a democracy than it would be somewhere else which is very curious. How does one remove from office and from positions of power, men, and I say men, and nothing sexist. They are mainly all men. How are they to be removed when year after year, decade after decade they have consolidated power. The two party system in America has made politics virtually impossible for young and idealistic people unless they want to corrupt themselves and play these games. And one sees someone with the negative qualities of a Nixon rise to the top fairly easily and win an election with a great mandate. And one sees idealistic younger people simply getting nowhere."

GERBER: "Well, I am reminded of Ezra Pound's lines in Mauberley Money says that I believe it is when he says, "You so choose a knave or a eunuch to rule over you.""

OATES: "A knave or a eunuch."

GERBER: "Yeah."

OATES: "A knave or a fool."

GERBER: "Always talk about the mediocrity of president candidates and your speaking of the knavery of another, makes me wonder if that prediction hasn't come to pass."

OATES: "Well, I think it's so much about enough with our system and with a sense of paralysis. That we have freedom of a very superficial nature. Now in East Europe and in the Soviet Union there isn't freedom of the kind that we have at all. There is a kind of explicit denial of the freedoms that we blatantly advertise. But when it comes down to it, are we any more free to choose our governing leaders than they are? I would really rather doubt that we have much more freedom of choosing between Republicans and Democrats on that high level and that's because we have local people. Local people do a lot of work and they take a lot of dirt. They're treated like dirt by higher level party people. But when it comes right down to it, do we have a lot more freedom in that respect than the Poles? Or the Hungarians? I think --."

GERBER: "A lot of Americans are feeling this frustration right now I think."

OATES: "Oh, the frustration."

GERBER: "And our political structure is really out of our hands."

OATES: "It's out of our hands. And some of us just feel absolutely indifference. And I think though that small margin of us -- I'm not part of that -- who feels passion may drift into terrorism and to violence. In the 60's the SDS and the Weathermen were very idealistic young people who went crazy."

GERBER: "I took a poll in my freshman group on the current election and the result was four for Reagan, four for Carter, three for Anderson, and twelve totally indifferent."

OATES: "How interesting. Very interesting."

GERBER: "These are young voters for the first time, of course."

OATES: "That's very interesting. And in the 60's there would have been perhaps a very passionate minority of one or two people who would say, "Assassination". You know, there was this passion."

GERBER: "Right. It's been replaced by total apathy."

OATES: "Right."

GERBER: "On many people's part."

OATES: "Right. I know. I feel that way."

GERBER: "And I feel bad in terms of the younger people."

OATES: "I do, too. Yes."

PARSHALL: "Before we close up here would you like to make a prediction about --?"

OATES: "No. Not at all. Not at all. It will be very ancient and uninteresting history very soon."

PARSHALL: "Well. Thank you all for appearing, Phil Gerber, Mary Elise, and of course, Joyce Carol Oates. We look forward to what's coming next. And I'm sure there will be something."

[Music]

VOICE: "This exclusive Brockport Writers Forum program was recorded on videotape on October thirtieth, 1980, as part of the Writers Forum, a Department of English presentation, State University of New York, College at Brockport.

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