

## Joyce Carol Oates: politics, childhood readings and writing rituals at the 2020 FILBA virtual opening

CE Noticias Financieras English

October 17, 2020 Saturday

Copyright 2020 Content Engine, LLC.

All Rights Reserved

Copyright 2020 CE Noticias Financieras All Rights Reserved

**Length:** 1872 words

### Body

---

A decade took a decade to become real the desire of Filba's organizers to add to their agenda the author of *The Daughter of the Gravedigger* and *Blonde*, but it finally materialized. Celebrated American writer Joyce Carol Oates opened the Buenos Aires Literature Festival (FILBA) last night, Friday. He did so through a series of reflections in which he emphasized that "the deepest change in culture has to do with feminism and the rise of ethnic identity" and assured us that literature "teaches us that we need other people, other women and girls." "We shouldn't live alone or alone," he said. He also referred to the harm social media can do by disclosing misinformation, when talking about his country's political situation, a few weeks into the November 3 presidential election. "Democracy depends on people being educated and receiving the right information," he said

Thanks to the attributes of virtuality – the 82-year-old writer is currently avoiding long journeys – in this obligatory online edition of FILBA, whose main theme in such an exceptional year is change and transformation, Oates fans were able to access rich notes on their literary education, their way of seeing literature, how artists and scientists analyze the world, his skepticism about the scenario that will leave the pandemic and its positioning over US President Donald Trump.

"For me, literature begins with a state of mystery. You wonder why that happened that way, who is that person? And if you know someone who makes an impression on you, you may feel that person is a mysterious figure, and you want to understand that person," the writer said from a room with her walls entirely upholstered with books, as well as almost all the environments that make up her home outside Princeton, New Jersey.

He exemplified: "I believe, for example, that Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace* because of his great obsession with Napoleon. If Napoleon had not been a great obsession for Tolstoy, he would not have written *War and Peace*."

Joyce Carol Oates books

The narrator and essayist also assured that all writers are dominated by a certain obsession or event in their lives: "For many people who went through the war, those terrible events are going to come back and they're going to feel like they should write about it. If love is disappointing or ends badly, some will want to write about a marriage that didn't work out, that seemed so perfect, and suddenly something happened. This is the element of mystery," he said.

Known for novels in which she learns about sexual abuse and other violence on women by men and societies that are embedded in the mark of an atvic machismo, Oates devoted part of her presentation to reflecting on the conquests of feminism. "I started writing about it when I was young, I was twenty-something. I wrote a lot about girls and adolescents dealing with a potentially violent world against women, and how women and girls need to come together," she evoked.

"I have no doubt that there must be a sorority: isolated people are victims, people who join with others are much stronger," he said. He then quoted one of his novels, *Foxfire: confessions of a girl band* and reflected: "Literature

teaches us that we need other people, other women and girls, we need to live with sorority, we should not live isolated or alone. You don't have to blame the victims, you have to try to understand them and help them. Feminist literature encourages that."

He also alluded to the central role of imagination for any activity linked to creativity, an attribute that involves not only literature or art, but science or mathematics. "Most people when they look at the world only see it as it is, but scientists or artists look at the world and wonder how we got here, what the causes are and where we're going. Those are the old questions of imagination," she said.

In a presentation that flew over some autobiographical notes, Oates referred, unsurprisingly, to the impact of life-changing to which the pandemic pushed, although in his case related his scope. "I was teaching at Princeton University, and when we started quarantine, they sent me home. I continued to teach my students through virtual platforms, just like all my colleagues. I've been writing. My work and work didn't change. I've always been a person who's spent time in solitude and now I spend more time alone," she said.

Then Oates expressed his skepticism about the social transformations that this situation could bring about: "I don't think there will be a change in society after the pandemic. There was no change in society or humanity after the Spanish flu of 1918. I don't think people have changed," he said.

"I think science will learn; scientists are focusing on epidemics and infectious diseases. We'll learn from it. But unfortunately nations are ruled by politicians and politicians are often anti-science. An ignorant president, like Donald Trump who is extremely ignorant, despises science. And if you have a leader who ignores science, it won't matter much. Instead, if you have a leader who is smart and has advisors who will follow the scientific guidelines, then there will be a change," he argued.

Later, Oates said that the ritual of writing is crossed by a "religious fervor" and that while "religion does not assume itself as mythological or metaphorical - religious people do not think they are talking about something metaphorical when they speak of God-", literature could be considered "as another expression of human imagination: the creation of gods, religions and deities".

The writer also drew a categorical differentiation between the impact of art on other disciplines and supports: "Literature, such as music and poetry, affects or has a particular influence on individuals. If you want to affect or reach a larger group, you have to do something more direct. Today, for example, with television or speeches from politicians who are televised or advertising that tries to change people's behavior in consumer culture," he compared.

"But art transforms people individually," he stressed. A poet expects his audience to be quite small, but people can get very excited or excited, for example, with the work of Neruda, Cavafis, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman."

The writer, born on June 13, 1938 on a farm in up to New York State, also referred to the readings that proved decisive in her literary training. "The books that they completely changed my life were Alice in Wonderland and Alice through the mirror, they were my first books. My grandmother gave them to me when I was eight or nine, she was very young. I grew up on a farm and my paternal grandmother gave them to me. I already knew how to read and I was transported to another world, so different from my life on the farm and so wonderful," he evoked.

"I devoted that book many times, memorized it with no intention of doing so; she could recite the poems, she was fascinated," she said. I think Alice's lesson is that the imagination is overwhelming. Lewis Carroll was wonderful, very funny but also very dark. And Alicia, who is only seven years old in history, is very skeptical of adults. She watches the adults and thinks 'I don't believe in what they say.'"

Oates defined both works as "a fascinating portrait of a very strong girl facing adults" and emphasized, "At the age of eight or nine I had never met any child who could be skeptical of adults. I hadn't met any children like Alice. So reading about it and Wonderland was amazing."

At the age of 14 or 15, the writer came to the works of Ernest Hemingway, who became one of her youthful milestones: "I read her first stories, which are quite different from her later work, from her most famous novels. The stories he wrote when I was twenty-something years old seemed transformative to me. So when I was that age I had that influence and I was surprised by the Hemingway style. Not so much for its theme, but for its style, the language it used, the narrative ability. His minimalism was and continues to be very important to me," he said.

Known for her tolerant social gaze toward sexual dissent and racial minorities, these issues occupied a prominent stretch in the intervention of the author of *Mud Woman* and *Bird of Paradise*.

"A lot has changed in our culture, in America. I believe that deeper change has to do with feminism and the rise of ethnic identity. We have a culture of black and African-American literature, which is very important, especially after the second half of the twentieth century," he said.

"Toni Morrison, who won the Nobel Prize, drew attention to the element of race and racism in America. And we have the gay and lesbian movement that also corresponds to the late twentieth century, which establishes an independent literature and a culture of its own. Also interesting is the literature of ethnic identities, for example, Chinese-American writers such as Amy Tan or Indian-American like Jhumpa Lahiri. They are all combined because my country is very diverse," Oates listed.

The author of *Infiel* also stated that before that there was no literature of women or feminists, gays or lesbians in bookstores – "there was only fictional literature written by white men," she said, but she recounted the gravitation of this omission in her literary career.

"I don't know if this changed my career, because the writers or artists who were white men were the mainstream. But other women who were on the margins like Eudora Welty, Flannery O' Connor, Edith Wharton, Elizabeth Bishop were important to me. In England there were also wonderful writers from the beginning of time, such as Jane Austen - who was always recognized as a great writer - George Eliot was also a great writer, or Charlotte and Emily Brontë," she argued.

The writer also referred to writing rituals, the need to set spaces and times in privacy to dedicate them to creations: "If you have a very noisy and large family and you also have a job, you must find the time when you can enter your studio and close the door," she said. Emily Dickinson was talking about closing the door at the end of the day. He had no privacy during the day with his family. But at night, when he went to his room, he had a small desk and worked there on his poetry at midnight, in solitude."

"Loneliness gives rise to literature and other times it can be an impediment. Sometimes in our lives we find ourselves alone, and loneliness doesn't always mean being alone: you can be alone within a big family, or in a marriage, if it doesn't work. But to be a good artist, a good writer, you have to inevitably spend time in solitude," said Oates, who decided to close her speech with a poem of hers that was published years ago in *The New Yorker* magazine and with a warm farewell greeting in which she included her cat, who was walking around her room while recording her speech, which was very celebrated on FILBA's youtube channel.

Virtuality this time brought Joyce Carol Oates to her readers' house.

\*With Télam information

READ ON:

Joyce Carol Oates: "Most of my characters are persecuted for their past and struggle to free themselves"

With the opening of Joyce Carol Oates and closure of Vivian Gornick, all ready for the imposing and virtual Filba 2020

**Load-Date:** October 18, 2020