

*The Tattooed Girl* by Joyce Carol Oates (Fourth Estate)

4 July 2004

By my count, this is Joyce Carol Oates's thirty-ninth novel, apart from any number of short story collections, novellas, poetry volumes, plays and collections of essays. Less prolific authors are inclined to look askance at such a massive output, as if its sheer abundance raised a presumption against its quality.

The fact is, though, that there is nothing in this novel to suggest mere mechanical plot-spinning: the situation is freshly imagined, the characters are fully developed, the prose is workmanlike, the plot competently engineered. If, then, one is left less than satisfied at the end of its three hundred pages, it is not because there is anything perfunctory in Oates's treatment.

Rather, the novel's central weakness lies in its plot premise. Joshua Seigl, a famous but very unprolific author, discovering at the age of thirty-eight that he is suffering from a degenerative nerve disease, decides to appoint an assistant. He interviews any number of quite suitable young men, but somehow resists appointing any of them. Then, at a whim that remains as unconvincing as it is unmotivated, he appoints Alma, the Tattooed Girl, totally unqualified as she is for the job. The novel never recovers from this implausibility. Oates gives us alternate access to the thoughts and assumptions of Seigl and Alma, and much of the interest of the novel lies in the mutual lack of comprehension that emerges from this double perspective. Seigl, consciously kind and considerate of his assistant, assumes that she is properly appreciative and considerate; Alma, mistakenly taking her employer for a Jew, pours on him all the scorn and hatred she, as under-privileged outcast, feels against Jews. She regards them as heartless capitalists responsible for the urban decay of Akron Valley, of which she is a product and a victim: "If you traced it back far enough, not whose names were on the mines but who actually owned the mines, these were banks, the international conspiracy of Jew-banks."

She is goaded on in her hatred by her lover Dmitri, a supremely unpleasant and manipulative drop-out, who happens to be a waiter in Seigl's favourite restaurant. Resenting while pocketing Seigl's lavish tips, Dmitri sees Alma's presence in the writer's house as his own opportunity to fleece his benefactor.

All this is promising enough, and is indeed deployed with skill and verve. There is some comedy in the chasm between Seigl's slightly complacent, self-absorbed generosity and her primitive resentment: she spits into the drinks she has to serve his guests, laces his Boeuf Bourguignonne with menstrual blood, and devises plans of killing him.

The problem is that Oates has decided that Alma is to be a kind of anti-Seigl, not only in her blonde Aryan brutality, but also in being almost totally inarticulate, capable of only the crudest notions of love and hate. Seigl, on the other hand, is an intellectual as well as a writer, involved in a translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, a regular contributor to learned journals and symposia. Technically, the challenge Oates sets herself is to have these two disparate characters interact in an interesting and plausible way.

But the two characters remain just too much on different levels of consciousness to have any kind of believable contact. Oates tries to effect this contact by acting as mediator between her characters, and also between her characters and the reader. This produces a lot of explanation on her part, but very little real interaction. A propos of Seigl's search

for an assistant, we are told, somewhat portentously, that “a flawed soul yearns to be healed: in secular times, we require the stranger to complete us, where we lack the strength to complete ourselves.” This profound-sounding generalisation, however, does not feed into the life of the novel at all: Seigl is not notably flawed of soul, and is not “completed” by Alma in any but the most utilitarian of senses.

Alma, too, does not live up to her creator’s claims for her. We are told, for instance that “the Tattooed Girl was the first to concede her weakness for adoring any man who refrained from kicking her in the gut, as she adored any man who did kick her in the gut, out of a craven need to adore any man.” What pretends to be a psychologically complex state of ambivalent desire, turns out to be a simple undifferentiated need for “any man”, no more interesting than the impulse that makes a stray dog follow any human being home.

A central question is why Alma should hate her benefactor so viciously. Oates comes up with several answers, suggesting that even she doesn’t find any one of them particularly convincing. There is undifferentiated anti-Semitism: “She had no clear idea why *I hate him. Hate his whiskers, his fat Jew lips.*” A few pages later, however, it seems that she hates him because he is so atypical of Jews as she sees them: “mostly that was why she hated him. Because he didn’t know what he owned. Like a blind man his eyes were turned inward, like a deaf man he heard only the sound of his own voice inside his head.” Where Alma’s hatred is as indeterminate of origin as this, it is difficult to believe, as we are asked to do, that this can turn into love. Partly Oates tries to motivate the change by having Alma find out that Seigl is not in fact technically a Jew – but a change of heart premised on such a value system is neither significant nor interesting. Her dumb hatred turns into dumb love, and though this makes her marginally more likeable, it hardly makes us care enough about what happens to her. The bloody climax of the book, then, falls somewhat short of its intended effect.

In the end, Oates’s characters are concepts, not people: they live in her head, not on the page. No wonder that their deaths leave us as cold as their lives.