

## **Dear Joyce Carol Oates: The Dead Don't Need You Slumming in Their Murders**

*A Book Review of "Babysitter," or How Karens and Kens are Appropriating the Misery of Surviving Victims of True Crimes*

Writers should usually stick to writing instead of critiquing their peers, most of whom struggle enough just to get published. But Joyce Carol Oates is not my peer, as she's among the most famous writers in America and has published over 40 books, while "The Kill Jar" was my first book larger than the volumes of poetry I'd written. I am a nobody in Joyce Carol Oates' world, so I feel comfortable saying that her most recent work, "Babysitter," is a book of affirmations for non-readers that they were doing just fine without books to begin with. It's tedious, without substantive social or intellectual merit, and it's all just painfully wrong. Instead of the customary Acknowledgments in the back pages, the end note to "Babysitter" should've been an Apology to the surviving family members of the victims of the Oakland County Child Killings, a case whose details she macerates for decoration in her drink.

I am intimately familiar with the Oakland County Child Killer (OCCK) case files, having now spent over fifteen years researching these allegedly-unsolved gruesome murders that occurred in the mid-1970s in the suburbs of Detroit. I possess roughly ten thousand pages of case-related documents, have spent many hundreds of hours in conversations with people close to the case, wrote and published "The Kill Jar" about my hunt through the case files, and Executive Produced the OCCK-based television series, "Children of the Snow," in which I was featured as an On-Camera Investigator leading viewers through the horrible OCCK crimes. That show has been streamed by millions of people via Hulu and other platforms, but apparently either Oates has not seen it, nor read my book, or seemingly has no qualms about many of the attempted anchors in "Babysitter" merely scraping sand for their lack of adherence to already known facts. Ah, *but Babysitter is fiction*, you might say! And I'll get to that.

For background, I am a Midwestern boy, a native Detroiter, plagued by self-reflection and manners, so I invariably had quandaries about publicizing my work on "The Kill Jar" when it was so obviously based on dark material that many would say I had no right to exploit for what might appear to have been self-gain. I stated then and now that this very reason is why I wrote my book about the OCCK as a memoir of a hunt, not as pulp murder fetishism for the middle class and their Tuesday night junk wine group. A year after my book came out, I penned a small piece on Medium called "Selling Out the Dead," in which I wrote about the shame I felt hawking another's loss, and about my commitment to a moral compass pointing at exposure for the case, fairness to the families of the victims, and advocacy for the truth from law enforcement, which to this day keeps the case officially "open" in what seems to be an effort to avoid providing complete case files in Freedom of Information Act requests. To be clear, I am not holding myself as a spiritual leader of people or practice, simply as an expert in this one thing: The Oakland County Child Killings, and attempting to treat them with equal grace to what its intimates allowed in my trespass through their lives.

Not surprisingly, few people have radar for pretension and BS like a native Detroiter, as we've lived through some very tough times—Oates should know that, since she also long-ago lived

and taught in Detroit, which only lessens the digestibility of her carelessness with the OCK case and her disregard for painting a realistic picture of the city during a period when the world could use that. I know of no other previous resident of Detroit, one of the most complex and rich microcosms in America, who has written about it with less fervor than what “Babysitter” demonstrates. Oates does name-drop familiar streets or a hotel on a few occasions, stating that her protagonist gazed onto Woodward Avenue, for instance. Good job there. Detroiters know Woodward, but Oates spent no time in her description of the complexities of that thoroughfare, appeared intellectually uninvolved with its nuances, which are many, and gave only faint indicator that this street itself stretches great distances through the case files. This is clearly because Oates has not read more than small portions of the available but limited OCK documents, if she has read anything beyond a few news clippings, and seemingly has no lasting understanding of the city she set her novel in. I wouldn’t call her a tourist, except for in the sufferings of the victims of this case, but I would say that she phoned this novel in as a flyover might; she never landed, just seemed to look down at the little square plots in her memory and marvel at how cute they might be for her whimsy.

More to the heartbreaking point is Oates’ fragile grasp of even the most commonly known details of the OCK case. If a reader can make it through the tedious overwriting, that reader will soon discover ideas about this horrible series of murders that are completely wrong—but the reader won’t know it unless they were already a follower of the case. For instance, “Babysitter” erroneously fictionalizes the murderer as a lone wolf whom she names “Bernard Rusch,” a play on the real-life Christopher Busch whom I began to publish extensively about on Medium in 2015. Today, Busch remains my primary suspect, but my work on “The Kill Jar” and “Children of the Snow” went to great lengths to prove that the Oakland County Child Killings were team killings. Since the case is officially unsolved, you might suggest that Oates is merely offering another viewpoint. While she dances around the idea of “Rusch” having help from people paid to clean up his mess, her lack of substantive detail is a dead giveaway for her lack of research. She even lets one child live, but allows for his drop-point to occur behind a dumpster, while in real life there was a drop near a dumpster but the child, Mark Stebbins, was already dead. It’s as if Oates just scanned some online sources then neurotically wrote “Babysitter” from waning image recall on breaks from tweeting, the way English 101 students might write their papers just to get the assignment turned in.

Terrifyingly, the evidence in this case is robust, including law enforcement’s cataloguing of multiple DNA samples that were found on the bodies of the child victims. We know there to be multiple perpetrators involved, and there were no less than five sexual predators of the era who failed polygraphs about their involvement in the case. And, well, I wrote a whole book about the other reasons why the lone killer theory is a pointless obstacle right now. If Oates had presented a rationale for her utilization of this long-debunked theory I could possibly forgive her naiveté. Additionally, she fictionalizes the murders of Rusch’s parents by Rusch himself, and then fictionalizes the details surrounding Rusch’s own murder, framed as a suicide, the one fact Oates seems to get right. In real life, however, Busch’s parents outlived him, and Busch was indeed murdered and his suicide faked but much earlier in his life than Oates

presents. There are many other examples of Oates coopting details but mishandling them for no apparent reason other than to fit a narrative hole she might have worked herself into.

*But it's fiction, you repeat!* Let's phrase it like this: Would you appreciate a novel by a famous author about your own real-life family that totally gets it wrong? Instead of your dad being nice, for instance, he takes the occasion of Thanksgiving to set fire to the armpit of your mother with a candlestick, even though he never did that in real life? Or how about a novel about your lover, and in the pages she is sleeping with your neighbor, two city council members, and a random alcoholic she met at a gas station, even though in real life your lover is completely devoted to your marriage and children?

Fiction, at its best, can re-imagine true events to add texture and variety to the ways we synthesize the beauty or horror or simple everydayness of life. The best fiction writers make us *feel*, no matter the subject, and through that feeling we *know*. In Oates' forced invasion into the house of the Oakland County Child Killings, feeling and knowledge have been stripped away. There are plenty more examples of this. God knows, I took five pages of notes while reading "Babysitter" but they all added up to one thing, what I feared from the beginning and what Oates must have—she just must have—totally not cared about: The story of the Oakland County Child Killings is a story of four children, ages 10 to 12, who were abducted, held in captivity, sexually molested, and eventually murdered then dumped into the streets like garbage. Oates even got wrong the now well-known details around the depositing of the children's bodies, suggesting merely what early mythology ran with, that the children were all meticulously bathed and tidy and presented with their arms neatly crossed over their chests. But I spent years staring at a case photo of Victim #4, Timothy King, lying face down in a ditch as if thrown from a moving vehicle, his body crumpled onto itself.

That photograph of Timmy haunts me. It is a photograph that Joyce Carol Oates must not have taken the time to view when scribbling-out "Babysitter," an indicator that her fancy for her own literary ambitions, or lack of same, triumphed over moral obligation to those very real people still living for what is now over forty-five years with the pain of their loss. I see the photos of all the children in the case files I studied relentlessly when writing "The Kill Jar," and I think of something I wrote on Medium: "The dead bang their fists on our doors, telling us they've paid enough. They don't want a ticket to whatever show we think we've done them justice by." Oates' ignorance about the case she appropriated for "Babysitter" is not unusual these days, as Karens and Kens around America jump on the crime pony and ride it like a carnival act for clicks. I'm just surprised that Oates didn't do better.

J. Reuben Appelman is author of "The Kill Jar" and Executive Producer of "Children of the Snow," each about the Oakland County Child Killings.