

# 2007 Keynote Speaker



Photo by Marion Ettlinger

**Joyce Carol Oates**

**Joyce Carol Oates** is a literary legend, one of America's most prolific, versatile and distinguished writers of the last century. She has written novels, short story collections, several volumes of poetry, books of plays, five books of literary criticism, and some of the most savvy and penetrating nonfiction essays, articles and books published in the last 25 years. No wonder the renowned novelist John Gardner called her "one of the greatest writers of our time."

Oates has won nearly every literary award on the planet, including the 2005 Prix Femina, France's literary prize for the best novel published in the country, 2004 Fairfax Prize for Lifetime Achievement in the Literary Arts, PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in short fiction, the Rosenthal Award from the American Academy - Institute of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the O'Henry Prize for Continued Achievement in the Short Story, the National Book Award for her novel *Them*, and in 1978, membership in the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. *What I Lived For* was nominated for the 1995 PEN/Faulkner Award. In 1999 she was nominated for the Nobel Prize for the third time. In 2003 she received the Commonwealth Award for Distinguished Service in Literature and the Kenyon Review Award for Literary Achievement. When she received the *Chicago Tribune* Literary Prize for Lifetime Achievement last year, the *Tribune's* cultural critic wrote that Oates "chronicles the breadth of the American experience as no other author ever has, striking every important national touchstone—social justice, sports, race, gender, terrorism—but not as broad categories, not as labels, but through stories about people—people and the places in which they thrive or falter, dream or don't dream, live and die."

Despite her literary fame, Oates has remained down to earth. "I take my writing seriously, but I don't take myself seriously," she says. In *The Faith of a Writer*, Oates writes about her humble origins in rural, upstate New York, attending a one-room schoolhouse that lacked indoor plumbing. In that schoolhouse, she began to write her first "books," filling pages with her observations and drawings of the world around her. She never stopped writing. She sees it as sacred ritual, a way to find meaning even in the most violent and cruel corners of life. Her literary nonfiction book, *On Boxing*, for example, explores boxing's brutality, but also truths about the drama "of life in the flesh" experienced in the ring.

To Oates, writing is art—an immersion of drama, language and vision. "My belief is that art should not be comforting," she writes in her introduction to *The Best American Essays of the Century*. "Art should provoke, disturb, arouse our emotions, expand our sympathies in directions we may not anticipate and may not even wish."

Last year, Pinckney Benedict, an author who once studied under Oates, spoke about his literary master in a way that gets to the core of her enduring legacy. "She's a warrior for the truth," he said.

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