



Joyce Carol Oates

Black Girl/White Girl
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Q: What drew you to examine race relations in the post-Vietnam milieu of a women's liberal arts college?

A: Like Genna, I have long been haunted by certain memories having to do with intense relationships, particularly interracial relationships, of that turbulent era. Primarily, *Black Girl/White Girl* is the story of two very different, yet somehow "fated" girls; for Genna, her "friendship" with Minette is the most haunting of her life, though it is one-sided and ends in tragedy.

Q: Why did you decide to implicate Minette Swift in some of the racist harassment she suffers?

A: Partly, I was moved to dramatize an actual sequence of events that took place in a college dormitory in the 1970s, not at any university at which I've taught but in the near vicinity. Minette has complex, largely unconscious motives for much of her behavior that might seem irrational to others.

Q: To what extent is Genna's revelation of her father's complicity in the death of a security guard a response to her own sense of culpability in Minette's death?

A: Genna is that rare individual, a "good" person; she has internalized a genuine moral code, and is appalled by her father's seeming involvement in the death of an innocent man. Yet it is only under emotional duress that she exposes him. Her sense of guilt in regard to Minette is less clear: all along, Genna has been shielding Minette from a confrontation with the truth out of her timidity and fear of provoking anger in Minette. To the very end, perhaps naively, Genna yearns for Minette's friendship.

Q: Is the "difficult" persona of Minette Swift a reaction to the isolation she feels as one of the few black students at Schuyler, or is it inherent to her character?

A: To Genna, Minette is fascinating because she is the unknowable, elusive, seemingly self-reliant Other. Genna seems to have little awareness of Minette as a lonely, insecure, deeply frustrated young woman who has grown up in a sheltered environment where she has felt entitled and superior as the daughter of a renowned Negro minister. (Though there is a side to Minette that is genuinely religious, even humble.)

Q: Others have described *Black Girl/White Girl* as a coming-of-age novel. To what extent do you agree?

A: Yes, *Black Girl/White Girl* might be described as a "coming-of-age" novel, at least for the survivor Genna. It is also intended as a comment on race relations in America more generally: we are "roommates" with one another, but how well do we know one another?