



## I'll Take You There

By Joyce Carol Oates  
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Most days I did not see Vernor. These were days so defined: as an insomniac night is defined by the absence of sleep, so these days of nullity and edginess were defined by the absence of Vernor Matheius.

Didn't I warn you: you don't love me. Don't even try to know me.

Because it can't be done. Knowing me.

Because identity is within. A man's self is within where the rest of you can't measure it.

== From *I'll Take You There*

Joyce Carol Oates' most recent novel is edgy, jagged, and succinct. Told by an unnamed narrator, *I'll Take You There* resonates with a hallucinogenic, dreamlike quality while it follows a young woman through a breakdown, a tormented love affair, a death vigil, and to the liberation of self.

Like a three-act play, the three sections of the novel move through conflict, climax, and resolution, beginning in a sorority house at Syracuse University. A bright scholarship student, a lonesome motherless girl from an upstate town, the narrator yearns to feel she belongs. When invited to become a Kappa Gamma Pi, she is jubilant, ignoring the obvious motives of her "sisters" who want her help in passing their courses. A sexual innocent among the experienced sorority girls and quickly identified as a misfit, she soon earns the enmity of the housemother, the formidable Mrs. Thayer . . . with disastrous consequences for them both.

Part Two tells of the narrator's relationship with an older black student in her ethics class. Infatuated with the heady words of Spinoza and Wittgenstein, and increasingly obsessed with the black man, she follows him, virtually stalks him, and finally makes contact with him. Inventing a name, Anellia, and changing the way she dresses == transforming herself to become someone who will attract him == the narrator begins to explore her sexuality, and his. But this is 1963, and she is soon labeled a "negro-lover" in an age of racial unrest. At the same time, anorexic, deeply troubled, and mentally fragile, the girl, turning twenty, begins to find her gifts as a writer . . . and some of her lover's secrets.

The first sentence in the final section reads: To show the fly the way out of the bottle? Break the bottle. Unexpected news will shatter the narrator's perceptions of her life, and send her racing across country trying to reach a figure out of her past before death claims him. There, in a surreal bedside vigil, she discovers the missing pieces of her life and the key to becoming whole.

A tightly worked gem of a book, *I'll Take You There* is a portrayal of a woman's inner reality and the development of identity, the ability to love, and the capacity to forgive. Beginning as a girl, ending as a woman, the narrator seeks to know herself and who she can someday be == in a shimmering, seamless narrative that displays Joyce Carol Oates's sure hand at plying the sometimes disparate desires of mind and heart.

### Questions for Discussion

1. The narrator never reveals her own name. What do we know for sure about this girl? What events in her childhood have left her emotionally conflicted? Is everything she says the truth? What does she lie about?
2. The first section of this novel evokes a Gothic romance: an old mansion, an aura of foreboding, a hidden secret in the housekeeper's room. How do the narrator's perceptions of her surroundings reflect her mental state? Is this kind of thinking typical of a teenage girl?
3. What is the narrator's fascination with Mrs. Thayer? Why does she trespass in the housekeeper's rooms? What does she find?
4. What attracts the narrator to Vernor Matheius? Do you think her brother Hendrick's words at the opening of Chapter Five == "You! You are capable of any thing" == are relevant to her choice of Vernor as the object of her desire? What attracts Vernor to her?
5. The narrator wants Vernor to love her. She says she loves him. Do you think that the narrator's feelings are love? If so, how would you describe this love? What happens to her relationship with Vernor?
6. The search for the missing father is a frequent theme in literature. Why? What has the absent father to do with our conception of ourselves? How has the narrator been affected by her relationship with her father? How does it change in the final section of the book?