



Black Girl/White Girl

By Joyce Carol Oates
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Introduction

Fifteen years ago, in 1975, Genna Hewett-Meade's college roommate died a mysterious, violent death. Minette Swift had been a scholarship student, an assertive—even prickly—personality, and one of the few black girls at their exclusive women's liberal arts college. By contrast, Genna was a quiet teenager from a privileged home, struggling to make amends for her own elite upbringing. When, partway through their freshman year, Minette fell victim to a torrent of racist harassment—from within the apparent safety of their tolerant, "enlightened" campus—Genna felt it her duty to protect her roommate.

Now, as Genna reconstructs the months, weeks, and hours leading up to Minette's tragic death, she is also forced to confront her own identity. Her father was a prominent civil defense lawyer whose radical politics—including defending anti-war terrorists wanted by the FBI—would deeply affect his daughter's outlook on life, and later challenge her deepest beliefs about social obligation in a morally gray world.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does Genna decide to reconstruct the facts surrounding the death of her college roommate, Minette Swift?
2. How would you describe the relationship between Minette Swift and Genna Hewett-Meade from the perspective of each roommate?
3. Why does Genna feel conflicted about her family's historic association with Schuyler College?
4. How would you characterize the climate of race relations at Schuyler during Genna and Minette's freshman year?
5. How do Maximilian Meade's philosophy and his public persona impact his relationship with his daughter, Genna?
6. What does Genna's decision to conceal the Hottentot Venus image from Minette and the Schuyler College administration reveal about her personality?
7. How does Minette's religious faith inform her worldview, and what accounts for Genna's attraction to her roommate's spirituality?
8. How is Minette's death connected to the incarceration of Maximilian Meade, and how does the narrator's account of these events relate to her self-described pursuit of truth in *Black Girl/White Girl*?
9. Which character or characters in *Black Girl/White Girl* did you most sympathize with, and why?

About the Author

Joyce Carol Oates is a recipient of the National Book Award and the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction. Author of the national bestsellers *We Were the Mulvaneys*, *Blonde*—which was nominated for the National Book Award—and the *New York Times* bestseller *The Falls*, which won the 2005 Prix Femina, Oates is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University and has been a member of the Academy of American Arts and Letters since 1978.