



My Sister, My Love

By Joyce Carol Oates
ISBN: 9780061806667

Introduction

New York Times bestselling author of *The Falls*, *Blonde*, and *We Were the Mulvaney*s, Joyce Carol Oates returns with a dark, wry, satirical tale inspired by an unsolved American true-crime mystery.

"Dysfunctional families are all alike. Ditto 'survivors.'" So begins the unexpurgated first-person narrative of nineteen-year-old Skyler Rampike, the only surviving child of an "infamous" American family. A decade ago the Rampikes were destroyed by the murder of Skyler's six-year-old ice-skating champion sister, Bliss, and the media scrutiny that followed. Part investigation into the unsolved murder; part elegy for the lost Bliss and for Skyler's own lost childhood; and part corrosive exposé of the pretensions of upper-middle-class American suburbia, this captivating novel explores with unexpected sympathy the intimate lives of those who dwell in Tabloid Hell. Likely to be Joyce Carol Oates's most controversial

novel to date, as well as her most boldly satirical, this unconventional work of fiction is sure to be recognized as a classic exploration of the tragic interface between private life and the perilous life of "celebrity." In *My Sister My Love: the Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike*, the incomparable Oates once again mines the depths of the sinister yet comic malaise at the heart of our contemporary culture.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the meaning behind the title *My Sister My Love*?
2. Joyce Carole Oates begins the book with a quote from Soren Kierkegaard. How is this quote reflective of the story that unfolds?
3. The narrator warns us the story is "a fairy tale out of Grimm." What does this mean?
4. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* defines "rampike" as "an erect broken or dead tree." Why do you think Oates chose this as the main characters' surname?
5. What is your opinion of Betsey and Bix Rampike? What kind of parents are they? Do they love their children? Do they know what love is?
6. How do the Rampikes compare to other parents in Fair Hills? Do you think Bix believes it when he tells people, "My kids come first with me." Do you believe it?
7. Skyler and Bliss were born into a seemingly perfect and privileged home—the kind of home many Americans think of as ideal. Yet their lives go so tragically wrong. Why?
8. What is Skyler's place in the Rampike family? What kind of relationship does he have with his sister and each of his parents? How does his relationship with his parents compare to that of his sister's?
9. Why does Betsey change her daughter's name from Edna Louise? The national fell in love with the young ice skater. What was her appeal? Betsey often tells her daughter, "you are one lucky little girl." Was Bliss lucky?
10. What might both children's lives have been like if Edna Louise hadn't been a gifted skater? Did the children ever have a chance at a different life?
11. Why did Skyler "tattoo" himself with red hearts? Why did Bliss insist that he give her one too?
12. Skyler calls his parents "Christians of the most American kind, unquestioning and adamant." How do you interpret this description? What is involved in being "a Christian"? Is anyone in the novel truly a "Christian"?
13. On an arranged playdate, Skyler tells his classmate, Tyler, he wants to be normal. "Freaky kids like us can't ever be 'normal.' Tyler says smugly. 'Our generation is some new kind of 'evolutionary development,' my shrink says. 'Normal' is just 'average' not cool." What is being "normal"? Why does Tyler sneeringly dismiss it? Is his disdain reflective of society's attitude in general?
14. Why is so much of the story told in footnotes?
15. Speak to the plight of Gunther Ruscha. Was he treated fairly? Why did he claim to be Bliss's killer? Why did he kill himself?
16. Was the media attention over Bliss's death our collective fault? Everyone complains about a "sensationalist media." Isn't the press "just giving people the coverage they want?" Should the media change? Can it?

17. Bix is one of the major executives in a cutting-edge biotech company—the kind that can have profound impact on our lives. Would you want a person like Bix helping to determine your future?

18. Were you surprised at the letter Betsey left her son after she died? What would you have done with it? Did Bliss deserve better?

19. *My Sister, My Love* interweaves many touchstones of modern American society: wealth, celebrity, religion, parenting, the reliance on pharmacology, the mental health care industry, child predators, the need to be unique and popular. How are these themes manifested in the novel?

20. What kind of portrait does the author paint of modern American society, especially privileged upper middle class Americans? What does it say about modern American life in general?

About the Author

Joyce Carol Oates is a recipient of the National Book Award and the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction. She is the author of the national bestsellers *We Were the Mulvaney's*, *Blonde*—a finalist for the National Book Award—and the *New York Times* bestseller *The Falls*, which won the 2005 Prix Femina, and *The Gravedigger's Daughter*. She is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University and, since 1978, has been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters since 1978. In 2003 she received the Commonwealth Award for Distinguished Service in Literature and the Kenyon Review Award for Literary Achievement, and in 2006 she received the *Chicago Tribune* Lifetime Achievement Award. She lives in Princeton, New Jersey.