

YOU MUST REMEMBER THIS By Joyce Carol Oates

“You Must Remember This,” Joyce Carol Oates demands in this, her latest novel, and proceeds to about-face us into the bleak time frame that was the 1950s.

We are back in a period of social and political repression, when loyalty oaths are demanded of and acceded to by many Americans, when sexual urges are clumsily satisfied in fogged-up cars, when the threat of nuclear devastation—on the heels of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—gives birth to the short-lived bomb shelter. In this stultifying social climate the Stevicks, a working-class family living in the chilly northwestern corner of New York State, play out their entwined individual fates.

Moving seamlessly into and out of the various narrative voices of the family, Oates uses the geography of Port Oriskany—as Joyce used Dublin and Faulkner his Yoknapatawpha County—to explore the universal strivings of people bonded by place and blood.

Past 50, Lyle Stevick is a man weighted down by the accumulation of many small defeats. He is conversant with the works of such philosophers as Hobbes, Spinoza and Schopenhauer, but his time nevertheless is spent amidst the discarded furniture that he buys and sells. \$TEVICK'S FOR \$AVING\$ reads the shamefully corny sign in his store. Lyle's family, while not physically removed, is no longer with him in spirit. His passive wife might just as well be one of the old chairs he slumps into, for all the liveliness he finds in her. His son is a physical and emotional casualty of the Korean War, and his three daughters seem lost to him, especially Enid Maria, his precocious youngest and the child he loves most.

Brooding over the tumbledown state of his loveless existence, Lyle obsessively measures himself against his half-brother, Felix, who seems to succeed without trying. Handsome, forceful, attractive to women, Lyle's kid brother, recently retired from the ring where he was a contender for the middleweight championship, has quickly made a bundle through shadowy real estate deals, the details of which are beyond the older man's knowledge.

Also unknown to Lyle (and everyone else) is that for more than a year the slender Enid Maria (who at 15 is half her uncle's age) and Felix have been having a love affair that is—to evoke a '50s word—torrid. It is Oates's bravura description of every step of this erotic relationship that periodically energizes the novel, revealing a maturity of accomplishment only hinted at in previous work.

The conformist era that the Stevicks inhabit is regularly invoked, like signposts that illuminate a once-familiar road. Fifties icons large and small are noted. Adlai Stevenson, Debra Paget, Carmen Basilio, the Rosenbergs, Arthur Godfrey, Bishop Sheen, Frankie Laine—these and other topical references place the story of the Stevicks within its historical context and explain their behavior.

When Felix asks Enid to dance for the first time, the song the band plays is “As Time Goes By.” The familiar standard, with its cinematically reinforced resonance of Bogart's and Bergman's lost love found again, flutters the young girl's heart. But Enid's is hardly a movie romance. As Felix's moods swing forth and back, both ecstasy and dread occupy the teenager's passionate core.

“She felt her eyes roll upward in her head in astonishment, gripping and releasing in a quickening beat that began to anticipate and hurry his own; she saw a match raised to a scrap of cloth or paper, then the tiny flame took hold, flared violently upward, was not to be stopped. Now all veered away from her and she realized she controlled nothing, surely not the tiny panicked muscles in spasms encircling him, her hands' wild clutching at his back, his shoulders, his hair, she sobbed aloud crying his name O love love love love she was ravenous wanting it never to end begging him never to leave her. She knew then she could not draw a single breath without him, she was dead.”

Sex as death for a good Roman Catholic girl is juxtaposed with a cold-hearted lover's physical fever. And the steamy affair itself is contrasted with Lyle's innocuous daydream of dalliance with a briefly encountered hat check girl and his timid real-life failure with an attractive woman whose antiques he has been summoned to buy.

On a first reading, the fullness of Oates' psychological insights can easily be overlooked as one forges ahead with the story. Re-examined, her virtuosity is apparent as she imagines herself into Enid Maria, then Felix, then Lyle and back again to the girl in an ever-widening circle. Each narrative ripple produces crucial truths by showing a character not only subjectively but through the multiple sensibilities of others.

What in the abstract seem paradoxical plot resolutions—the endurance if not vindication of a failed life, the breakdown of another that seemed invincible, the craving for obliteration by yet another whose possibilities seem endless—are resolved in masterly

ways by a writer who unsparingly portrays her main characters as the imperfect, tormented creatures they are.

And yet, after all the pain and revulsion and self-blame and heartbreak, in a long and sustained “mollybloom” soliloquy (from a male point of view), Oates movingly affirms much of the negativity that has preceded, ending this, her finest novel, on a surprising note of apotheosis.

San Francisco Chronicle, 1987