

Joyce Carol Oates, Berkeley Book Chats, March 6, 2019

Timothy Hampton: Welcome to Berkeley Book Chats. I'm Timothy Hampton, director of the Townsend Center for the Humanities.

Berkeley Book Chats showcase a Berkeley faculty member engaged in a public conversation about a recently completed work. This popular series highlights the richness of Berkeley's academic community.

Today's conversation features Joyce Carol Oates of the English Department discussing her book *Hazards of Time Travel*.

He is joined by Robert Hass also of the Department of English.

Robert Hass: Do you want me to describe the setup [of the novel]?

Joyce Carol Oates: That would be great. Yes, that'd be interesting.

Robert Hass: Or would you like to?

Joyce Carol Oates: No, I'd like to hear what you have to say. Anything Bob has to say is just interesting.

Robert Hass: I guess the genre would be dystopian novel. It's in roughly three parts. Maybe one-fourth, two-fourths, then one-fourth. In the first fourth, a young woman, 17-years-old, living in an authoritarian society, in which if you get in trouble for almost anything, you get vaporized. The main thing that they seem worried about people doing is thinking. This 17-year-old is her class valedictorian, however, people have warned her not to stand out in any way. Before she's able to give her valedictory address, she's arrested and given the highest punishment short of vaporizing, which is to be exiled. She's exiled at the end of part one to some place that resembles remarkably Madison, Wisconsin, and the University of Wisconsin in 1959. She's 17-years-old. A freshman living with five roommates who all seem to be farm kids from Wisconsin. Amazingly healthy people and they have all kinds of extraordinary gadgets. Stuff that she's never seen except in museums. Like one of her roommates has a typewriter.

Robert Hass: That begins the start of an experience that might partly be any kid, any 17-year-old girl, traumatized by beginning the freshman year at a university. Doubled by the fact that she's totally paranoid about whether or not she's being spied on and by whom, and brings from her previous experience, the idea that you really should not stand out, but she can't stand not being interested in her classes, which raises difficulties for her.

Robert Hass: The middle of the book is partly a love story and partly an adventure story about her falling in love with an assistant professor named Ira Wolfman, who is a teacher of Skinnerian psychology. He is the protégé of a quite famous Skinnerian of behaviorists. That becomes part of the story. It becomes a love story. Then there's a third part, and I'm not gonna tell you.

Joyce Carol Oates s: Thank you. That's wonderful. I just want to amend it a little. It wouldn't be Madison, Wisconsin, but it would be a more provincial branch of the university. Basically a rural university. I was so struck and really deeply moved when I read about people in the past who have been involved very passionately in their experiments and projects, in all kinds of disciplines. Including poetry, and fiction, and science, and philosophy, and anthropology, and psychology, which is the focus of this novel. They're working passionately on their experimentations, and they're all wrong. These people are going the wrong way. They're in a dead end. They're pursuing the idea that there's a steady state universe, or they're pursuing the Skinnerian vision of human nature, which would be overthrown basically in 10 years by Noam Chomsky.

Joyce Carol Oates: Being exiled intellectually is to be put back in this zone where no matter how hard you're working, you have the wrong idea. You have the wrong concept. Your experiment is brilliantly orchestrated, but it's the wrong idea. You'll find out eventually, unless you die before then, that you've failed. Yet, I've always been so interested that people work just as hard at failing as some people do at success, and maybe even more. Doesn't that sort of interest you, Bob?

Robert Hass: Yes.

Joyce Carol Oates: Because in this novel, people are writing Robert Frost kind of poetry, and they're rhyming, and they're very, very hostile and upset at the thought of beatnik poetry. They can't imagine that that's the way of the future. They're just passionate with these blinders on them.

Robert Hass: Yeah, I appreciated that. There's a very well-known poet in this book who everyone reveres. He has a great reputation, and she makes it clear that his work is mediocre and gonna be totally forgotten.

Joyce Carol Oates: Except he's the star of his campus. Each little campus has this famous man, or not likely a woman in 1959. Just really revered as just a great pioneer and genius, and yet null. History will see otherwise.

Robert Hass: Do you want to talk about what led you to this book?

Joyce Carol Oates: That vision is sort of like a vision of hell. For people who are involved in research, and intellectual projects, or writing a novel, or working on your poetry, or your art in any way. You don't want to think that you're putting your whole life's work and energy into a project that actually is a mistake. To me, that was like a vision of hell, and to be exiled to that place, would be horrific. Ira Wolfman is somebody from the future who's been exiled, so he knows very well this Skinnerian psychology. He has to hue the line. He has to be supportive of it. He knows that that's doom. He has his own ideas. It's fun to go back in time in the novel, like this, and sort of look into the future. Stanley Milgram, and some others would be experimenting with other visions of human consciousness. At that time, somebody might have looked and gotten that a little wrong, too. Everything is sort of waiting to happen.

Joyce Carol Oates: When you go back in time and you're looking forward to our present time, it's like a blurred mirror of what exists. All the possible ways that one might have gone, the possible ways that we might have gone if we had gone to this university, instead of a different university. Now, I completely exclude the University of California at Berkeley from this. This is like one of the great places in contrast to these provincial hellish places.

Robert Hass: Though there's some resemblance. That's the setup and it's intellectually incredibly interesting, and interesting in a bunch of other ways. The young woman has a microchip implanted in her head before she's tele-transported, which makes it impossible for her to remember her parents. But almost she can, as if through frosted glass. Sometimes if she works very hard to do it. That part of the book is really... it's about aching loneliness.

Joyce Carol Oates: Yes, and being unable to vividly recall why you're lonely. Yeah. I have another novel. "The Man Without a Shadow," which is almost like a companion piece. That's very much about an amnesiac based upon the most famous amnesiac in the history of neuroscience. He's called HM. I wrote that novel a few years ago, and both novels deal with memory, neurological deficits, and how our personalities are altered. And how, if we're living with people who have these deficits, we have to know how to speak to them and identify with them.

Robert Hass: It struck me they're almost opposite characters. The guy in the other book has no memory. He's like a goldfish in a bowl, endlessly finding new things-

Joyce Carol Oates: He has not short-term memory.

Robert Hass: No short-term memory.

Joyce Carol Oates: But he has a long-term memory.

Robert Hass: And he's very charming. That's another book in which to me, the setup is interesting, but then the relationship turns out to be even more interesting. A woman falls in love with this guy who every time he meets her says, "Hi. What a pleasure. Who are you?" They shake hands.

Joyce Carol Oates: Women have that experience all the time. Well, the idea is partly in the beginning, he's an experimental subject. The real HM was a goldmine for experimental psychology and neuroscience. My novel was very much, not exactly based on, but it was inspired by Suzanne Corkin's book "Permanent Present Tense : The remarkable history of the amnesiac HM." Suzanne Corkin was a professor at MIT. She worked for perhaps 30 years with this amnesiac, and my husband Charlie, who's a neuroscientist also, he had worked with HM a little bit because he's sort of like a goldmine for experiments.

Joyce Carol Oates: The experiments that I really charted in my novel either are real experiments or they're quite possible experiments as you do with somebody who's brain has been damaged. For instance, one of the interesting things is that our brains are so complex. You may think that you have autonomy over your life, or your drives and wishes, but you don't actually. A lot of it is done automatically unconsciously. A person who has brain damage in the hippocampus, which is short-term memory.

Joyce Carol Oates: If for instance, you're being an experimental subject, you could be told that you had just had your dinner. You ate a huge plate of food, and you're not hungry, even though you haven't eaten for 72 hours or something. Or conversely, you're told that you are hungry, you're very hungry, even though you had a big plate. And then you are hungry because you literally don't remember and so, another part of your brain has autonomy over that. The experimentations are quite fascinating because they throw a light onto our personalities, and so much of what we remember, we've actually forgotten.

- Robert Hass: I'm thinking about the fact that one theory of allegory is that like the fairy queen, is that this elaborate structure is created so they keep you busy, so that the emotional part of the unconscious can do its own work underneath this structure, which also involves understanding the intellectual history of brain research. Because the Skinnerian is a 17-year-old girl with hero-worship, loneliness, almost compulsive love for a 30-year-old assistant professor, which is a campus subject that people might be sensitive too, and they had different rules in 1959.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Well she perceives in him a fellow exile, and so he would be her only friend. I love the name Ira Wolfman. To me, that was very romantic. There's sort of a Jewish tone to it. I thought I was making up that name as I always think I'm doing. Then not long ago I got an email from Ira Wolfman. Oh, he's writing to me from this zone, this other world. He said, "Hello. I read your novel, and I'm very flattered by the image of me." He didn't sound in himself quite as interesting as my character.
- Robert Hass: I didn't do extensive research, but I have noticed that people are already writing about Freud's Wolfman and your Wolfman, right?
- Joyce Carol Oates: Oh yes. Yes. It probably does have reference to Freud's famous patients.
- Robert Hass: It takes him into the woods at a certain point in the book, this Wolfman. It takes her vulnerability to him is quite scary to me. Even though he seems like a perfectly benign person.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Well, it might be interesting to explore that, I hadn't thought of it. But maybe there's a deep masochism that I haven't acknowledged in it. However, I read was reading earlier today, a very sobering thought I think for all of us, that public libraries subsidize literary and quality non-fiction titles with romance titles. There are large public libraries who would have to shut down. They couldn't bring out so-called literary work because they would need the romance titles. In other words, there's something deeply, and powerfully, and irrevocably irresistible about romance. Sometimes it has a little masochistic tinge to it because it kind of defers to the patriarchy that is an authoritarian or a superior of being, and then somebody worships that being.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Somehow, though we are all egalitarian, I think there's still a remnant of that. You sort of see that politically, that you can have a thoroughly debased and valueless figure of some patriarchal semblance, who nonetheless built a lot of reverence, even though there's nothing there. It's sort of like a literally empty symbol, but you waive that flag or that symbol, and many people would defer to it. I don't think it's the same thing in my novel, but that's an interesting aspect of human nature, that we're hardwired. I think we feel that we're not. We're so skeptical.
- Robert Hass: It seems like dystopian novels are mostly about extrapolating scary political trends in the present into the future. "1984." "The Handmaid's Tale." It felt like you found yourself more interested in exploring 1959.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Or the sort of foundation for the present.
- Robert Hass: One of the things that happen to our heroin is that she's incredibly alarmed on her first time going to bed in the same living quarters with her roommates. They all put on these pink plastic electrodes in their hair before going to bed.

- Joyce Carol Oates: That was scary.
- Robert Hass: They were torturing themselves, and she's trying to figure out what they're doing.
- Joyce Carol Oates: I sort of wanted to show the foundations of manipulation of people and the mass market seduction that you see in advertising. Going back to John Watson, the so-called father of American psychology, and then B.F. Skinner, and sort of seeing how that looks ahead to the surveillance state, where the manipulations are so massive. Because when I wrote the novel I was working on in 2011, I had no idea at all, as none of us did, that we would have a different kind of political situation today.
- Joyce Carol Oates: We have a populous demagogue, who in many ways is a throwback. I mean throwback is a weak word for what we have. A sort of primitive example of bigotry, and racism, and things that are sort of old fashioned in our history. My novel was written before the campaign of 2016, which was a vicious and wildly divisive campaign from which we probably will never recover. No, I was actually looking ahead toward a surveillance state, which doesn't have that populous personality demagogue, who's like a clown, a sadistic clown, who's very vicious and funny in an ignorant way, playing to the populous.
- Joyce Carol Oates: In my vision, it's more of a surveillance state where the government is actually impersonal, and you never see a personality. You don't see a face. Particularly, you don't see a face like Trump. You don't see that particular face. It's more like it's just all around us, we're in a mesh, a web, of being surveyed and recorded all the time. When I was writing in 2011, 2012, I had really no idea of how it would be when the book was published, because it's much more elaborate now.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Some little thing that we do, like we all have our cell phones. Are the cell phones all recording us, right now? I mean, I can foresee a time, like next week, when all my thoughts, and my heartbeat, and the fact I may have some sort of pathology somewhere in my body. It's all being beamed into my insurance policy. Everything about you that's gonna be known that you don't know about, and you haven't acquiesced to, you haven't agreed to, all those things are recorded somewhere. You show up one day at the airport to get a ticket and you can't travel because you've had a bad thought about the President. It seems like it's funny but it's happening already in China. People's travels are gonna be curtailed depending upon of their social credit.
- Joyce Carol Oates: All of this is done without anybody ever agreeing to it. You sort of wake up one day, like Gregor Samsa, and you've turned in this symbol, this creature, who has no autonomy anymore. So I was looking, examining that state rather than the state that we actually have. But there are things in common, and one of the things in common is a hatred and distrust of skepticism, or free thought, and any kind of scientific endeavor. Shutting down libraries, taking away budgets for national parks, taking away budgets for education, all those things that we see happening with the Trump administration. It fits very well in with these other kinds of totalitarian states.
- Robert Hass: Maybe the audience would like to hear a little of what this sounds like.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Oh, I'm sure that nobody really would. I'll start off with a wonderful quote for B.F. Skinner from a book that's now sort of derided and seems very old-fashioned, but it's actually a classic. Skinner's "Science and Human Behavior."

- Joyce Carol Oates: "A self is simply a device for representing a functionally unified system of responses."
- Robert Hass: So the self, seen from the outside, from the point of the view of a government or a society wanting to control people, sees us a function of responses. We'd be stimulated in certain ways and then we'd give a response, and that's how we're controlled. Skinner thought it was virtually everything.
- Joyce Carol Oates: I'll just read one little chapter. The chapters are quite short. This is only one page long, and this is about the very famous behaviorist experiment of John Watson in 1920, and anyone who's taken psychology has seen these films. You can see them, the videos, you can just google them.
- Joyce Carol Oates: It was a famous behaviorist experiment of 1920 conducted by John Watson. The 11-month-old infant, little Albert, had not been frightened of any animals until a gentle white rat was placed on his lap and a sudden loud noise of two steel bars struck together behind his head several times in succession.
- Joyce Carol Oates: When you see the video, it's horrific, and yet it was very exciting science. The little baby is on a table and is being recorded, and is being filmed. John Watson stands behind him and he has this pipe, and he has this hammer or something. The little baby, first he sees, actually he sees a monkey, a frisky monkey. He's not afraid. He sees a dog. He's not afraid, he wants to pet the dog. He sees a person in a Santa Clause mask, who's John Watson actually. They even burn a newspaper in front of him, and his big eyes, he sees the burning newspaper but he's not afraid. He's just kind of curious. Then the very gentle white rat, and he leans over to pet the rat, and then John Watson starts hammering this incredibly loud terrifying noise right behind his head.
- Joyce Carol Oates: The little baby starts crying, and screaming, and he's in utter terror. He's convulsed. He starts to crawl off the table, and he's grabbed and pulled back. That's the first experiment. And soon then, little Albert began to cry at the very sight of the rat, as of the dog, even a fur coat and exhibit symptoms of terror preceding the clanging of the steel bars.
- Joyce Carol Oates: A month later they have the second experiment and the little baby is brought back. But this time little Albert doesn't exhibit the qualities that he did the first time. He's not looking around eagerly and batting his eye. He's more like hunched, and he's already physically sort of changed. Then, the white rat is brought in again and he sees the white rat. He starts screaming, and he's terrified of the white rat. He doesn't have to touch it or anything.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Eventually it's discovered that he's not only afraid of the white rat, he's terrified of the dog, and the monkey, and the person in the Santa Clause mask. Which I'd be terrified of that person if it was John Watson in the Santa Clause mask. He sort of leans close to this baby. I did a little research on this and you find out that John Watson never deconditioned him. You find out that the mother was paid \$1 for the use of her baby. This is one of the most famous experiments in the history of psychology. It made John Watson's career. It's classical Pavlovian conditioning.
- Joyce Carol Oates: You extract from that you can condition anybody, in any way, if you control the environment around them. We're naturally afraid of surprises. Our brains are naturally gonna recoil. You want to associate that natural recoiling with some thing that you don't want the person to like. You can teach fear and hatred of anybody, and anything, by conditioning people. It's not always done so crudely

with somebody standing behind you, but it's done in so many other ways. It's done through the media constantly. The idea that people, masses of people, are so controlled in this conditioning really begins with these Pavlovian experiments. To me, that was really very fascinating, and you can draw kind of an elliptical line between that in 1920 and what we have in 2019. It's depressing.

- Joyce Carol Oates: However, I do say in the novel, I feel in my own life that people make their connections at a much more intimate level. There are ways of communicating, and maybe through art, and peripheral ways of being outside the web of conditioning.
- Robert Hass: You begin with the Skinnerian definition of the self. It made me think about your essay on the reasons people write novels.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Oh, what did I say? I don't remember.
- Robert Hass: You said there were five reasons.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Aha.
- Robert Hass: One was commemoration.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Oh that was art generally, all of art.
- Robert Hass: Which had to do with setting family kin. One was bearing witness.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Bearing witness.
- Robert Hass: The third was self-expression.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Self-expression. Yeah.
- Robert Hass: You said the self is basically adolescent. And what characterized the adolescence was skepticism and rebellion.
- Joyce Carol Oates: I think the adolescent self is a self that we should all retain because it tends to be skeptical in perceiving the hypocrisy of adults. And also, adolescents are very funny. We enjoy teaching because our students are older adolescents, and they're witty and funny. Other adults, you know, it's just sort of a different world. But commemoration, think of all of the great poetry, like Irish poetry, basically is almost all commemorative.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Self-expression I think is self-explanatory. Bearing witness is much a part of our literary endeavor in any kind of writing. Journalism. We have a great journalists in this room with us Mark Danner, bearing witness to parts of the world that we have no access to. Sort of unearthing things that have been hidden. That's bearing witness. But I think the writer, and the journalist, and the poet, and the artist sort of go outside that mesh of conditioning and by asking the right questions and not being easily coacted. Sometimes I think we make a choice not to be coacted, but to go outside that mesh.
- Robert Hass: I don't know how the seed of this book was, but the narrator was 17-years-old, and it's about conditioning and rebelling. She's an initially exiled in the first place because of skepticism.

Joyce Carol Oates: Asking questions in a kind of naïve way. Yeah.

Robert Hass: Did the character appear to your first, or the setting with this book?

Joyce Carol Oates: I think writers don't always know why they write about certain things. I'm very interested in this sort of philosophical principal, what is the identity. I think in adolescence, particularly late adolescence, we start asking questions and we're not longer necessarily in the family or in the tribe, but suddenly asking questions. Where did time begin? Where did the universe begin? Sort of looking past the heads of your parents and grandparents to some other transcendental place and asking questions that the family can't answer. I think 17 years of age is sort of a good time for that. I also wanted a very simple plain prose style. George Orwell talks about the ideal English prose style is like a window, and you look through the window pane to the world outside, and it's represented to you clearly and truthfully. In contrast to, well, I think you're teaching Nabokov, it's the opposite. Because Nabokov is all about the window pane, and the curly q's, and the frost marks, and the beauty of the language that actually may obscure the reality behind.

Joyce Carol Oates: It's two different views of art. One is that it presents a world unvarnished and direct, and the other is that the canvas is itself. This is the beauty, there's nothing beyond it. It's actually the beauty in itself. I think those two aesthetic positions are each very interesting. What do you think?

Robert Hass: Mark Danner and I are teaching this course, and V.S. Naipaul, and Nabokov, and it's exactly on that issue that Naipaul is trying to represent these colonial societies. First of all, his own intro to accurately to find a language for it, and Nabokov's form of accuracy is actually being insanely specific. So that you're seeing things-

Joyce Carol Oates: In a very microscopic way.

Robert Hass: Right.

Joyce Carol Oates: But it's distorted.

Robert Hass: There's a two page description of how he takes a coat off.

Joyce Carol Oates: Oh, and then there's a pencil sharpener.

Robert Hass: The pencil sharpener is not unlike what you do in this book with the arcana of 1959.

Joyce Carol Oates: But do you think Naipaul is actually presenting the world objectively?

Robert Hass: No.

Joyce Carol Oates: He's doing it seemingly.

Robert Hass: But he has a desire to see through. He despises ideologies, except his own of course.

Joyce Carol Oates: Well, I admire both writers very much. And I think Nabokov is so complex and it almost helps to understand where he comes from. This sense of the aristocracy,

where didn't they have 50 servants for a family. Freed serfs. He's completely assimilated that sense of the superiority of himself and his wife. It's sort goes unexamined in Nabokov. He never steps outside himself. His homophobia, for instance, his derision of people different from himself. His focusing on physical features that are not beautiful to him. Many of us find that very offensive, you know, that he holds up for almost idolizing and fetishizing this certain kind of beauty, which is his own, and then he derides and he mocks almost everything else in the world. To me, that would be an interesting stumbling block to approaching Nabokov in a university course.

Robert Hass: Yes.

Joyce Carol Oates: Does anybody bring that up?

Robert Hass: Yes. We've been talking about just that. It actually reminded me of our friend, dearly departed Cheslav Milosh, has a quite wonderful poem in his late prose poems about being in a barber chair, and he's looking with amusement at how homely the two other men who are waiting are and he suddenly realizes that he must count himself among the handsome and then looks at his aging face in the mirror. But it is that entitled sense of your own beauty.

Joyce Carol Oates: Your own, yes.

Robert Hass: That can lead you to describe grotesquely everyone else's features.

Joyce Carol Oates: It's so anti-democratic and anti-feminist. It's interesting though. I mean, he's a very great writer.

Robert Hass: And deeply flattering to the reader who identifies with this.

Joyce Carol Oates: It's like he nudges you. We were just saying, the very first paragraph of Pnin, he describes Pnin in a way that's mocking and kind of ludacris. He's got short legs, or his head is wrong. He's sort of saying you and I are laughing at that person, and it's the kind of aesthetics of cruelty, but his idea of beauty I think is very limited because a face can be beautiful that is a very ravaged, and strange, and even distorted face. Like Francis Bacon's portraits are actually very beautiful. Nabokov has this very limited sensibility I think.

Joyce Carol Oates: I happened to be watching this amazing series, this Israeli series called Fauda, F-A-U-D-A, has anyone seen that? Nobody's seen that? Am I the only one in the room? What do you think of that?

Speaker 1: It's riveting.

Joyce Carol Oates: It's absolutely riveting, but the faces. Aren't the faces fantastic?

Speaker 1: Well he's like Michael Chiklis in *The Shield*, of another overweight, moodless guy who can't leave the room.

Joyce Carol Oates: He's impassive, but I'm thinking of all the other faces. We're talking about Israeli undercover intelligence, men and one woman. But my point actually is that the faces are so astonishing to watch. The actors ... I mean if you didn't even have any dialogue, you just put it on mute, you start looking at these amazing faces. I don't think Nabokov would see these faces as beautiful and profound. He would

see them as kind of ugly, maybe. But wow. I really recommend that. I'm not sure if it's a representation of Israel as it is, but it's quite a remarkable series.

- Speaker 1: There's some beautiful Palestinians too.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Oh, they're all beautiful. The most interesting thing about it for me, not that I even know much about the culture, but you can't tell the difference. There are Israelis who have been brought up to be like Arabs. They speak Arabic perfectly, they look like Arabs. They observe some of the rituals, but they are Israeli intelligent undercover police officers, and they are completely amoral. As my husband says, they are Israeli thugs, but they're sort of irresistibly interesting.
- Joyce Carol Oates: My original point was just aesthetics, that I think Nabokov has a very limited sense of the aesthetics of what beauty is.
- Robert Hass: The other motives for writing novels of the five were conveying a moral vision and making an aesthetic object. It's in that that you talk about reimagining beauty as one of the functions of writing.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Creating an aesthetic object for its own sake, not to move anybody, not to even sell books. Not to chain it in my mind. But as Virginia Woolf said, "The sentence in itself, beautiful." Now, that's a nice line. "The sentence in itself, beautiful."
- Robert Hass: Maybe we should invite the audience to join the conversation at this point.
- Wendy Martin: You said earlier about the protagonist, that perhaps there was a dimension of masochism. If you think of the year 1959 before the second wave of feminism, and not much memory of the first wave really, or at least what had been accomplished had been accomplished, couldn't you say that the protagonist had a deep identification with the professor because she admired him and wanted to be like him in many ways? And so it was a big part of her to identify with him to enlarge her view of herself.
- Joyce Carol Oates: Oh definitely. I agree. That's absolutely true. The edification, the admiration, the wish to have a mentor who's intellectual, whose fair minded, who's a creator and so forth. That was really the portrait. I think I was just being a little funny talking about masochism. But the motive of the writer is often masochistic because writing is very hard. When you set out on a project, as maybe many people in the room know, you set out on a project where you have a visionary idea, and you're all excited. But then you sort of go into the trenches and you're trying to execute it, and that sense of suffering in the short run, so that in the long run you have a product, you call it a little bit masochistic.
- Joyce Carol Oates: When people train for sports, for competitive sports, like boxers for instance, they have to have an ability to absorb a lot of punishment and a lot of delayed gratification with the hope that at the end it's worth it. I think that is a very loose definition of masochism. A more narrow definition is the one that is sort of contrasted with sadism and masochism, that the masochistic personality is drawn to the sadistic authoritarian. I think it might be built into the patriarch of culture, and has to be freshly examined almost every day of our lives. To what extent are we aiding and abetting this sort of sadistic authority?
- Robert Hass: There's another part of this that isn't exactly masochism. It's a subject complicated and intimate to universities, and to education. One part of education seems to be getting crushes on people whose particular kind of energy you want. It's one of the ways we learn. It makes very complicated the whole business of

relations between teachers and students, and what's appropriate behavior in relation to that kind of learning. It's not masochistic to want to be, or follow around, or get the attention of somebody who you find thrilling and want to intellectually admire. Which is the case of this young woman doubled by what looks like the patriarchy of 1959 society, and her particular form of exile and loneliness.

Joyce Carol Oates: He also is more of a younger person, so she and he would be united against the leaders. It's very Socratic. It's a Socratic idea that the boys are learning from Socrates, you know, the young boys.

Robert Hass: For them to talk to each other, you must of had inventing this. It's 1959, the bomb shelter on the campus, where they might be free from surveillance.

Joyce Carol Oates: I wonder if there's a bomb shelter here? I was once in a bomb shelter. I was taken through a bomb shelter. Many of them are secret. You don't know they exist. Any area where there are government officials, and people with a lot of money, there are actually bomb shelters but the ordinary people don't know about them. I was actually taken through a bomb shelter. I never got over that. I put the bomb shelter in a lot of my novels and stories, here we're back in the bomb shelter again. But the funny thing is, the one I was taken to was in Helsinki, and it was quite near the capital building, so it was for the leaders of the country. I was taken through this vast underground, subterranean, like a mausoleum, and it was like a place of the dead. There were mannequins with gas masks and protective clothing on. You thought if you had to go there, you might as well just die. And there were closets with canned goods, expiration date like 40 years ago, and that sort of thing.

Joyce Carol Oates: But all around the country. I'm sure there's one right by the White House, I mean there's probably a secret passage way where the first family will be taken. The rest of the country can be incinerated, but these sort of horrible people are going to be saved.

Robert Hass: When Nanjing was relentlessly bombed by the Japanese during World War II, when they reconstructed the city, the first thing they did in the middle of the city was make a massive bomb shelter. Which they've turned into a huge bookstore.

Joyce Carol Oates: Oh that's wonderful.

Robert Hass: A whole library of avant-garde.

Joyce Carol Oates: That's wonderful. I love that.

Robert Hass: As you walk in, there are silk banners of writers. My one experience of walking in was seeing silk banners of Joyce Carol Oates.

Joyce Carol Oates: Really?

Robert Hass: Gabrielle Garcia Marquez, Susan Sontag.

Joyce Carol Oates: Really?

Robert Hass: And Milan Kundera as you walk down into the bomb shelter. You will be happy to know.

Joyce Carol Oates: That sounds like a real hallucination Bob. I don't know what Bob was doing.

Robert Hass: As Ira Wolfman points out, you're never gonna know if this is a hallucination.

Joyce Carol Oates: You're never gonna know. Yeah that's a little chip in the brain.

Robert Hass: But other questions, we have a few minutes.

Mark Danner: Hi. I'm Mark Danner, and I want to ride to the rescue, at least a little bit, to the 40 years dead Vladimir Nabokov, who we just talked about in our class, as Bob knows, Pnin, yesterday. It's so interesting the points you were making about cruelty because, at the time he started the book, when he hadn't quite finished *Lolita*, he started to make money because he was afraid he wasn't going to sell *Lolita*. He had just given lectures on *Don Quixote* at Harvard. He was obsessed, he was outraged at *Don Quixote*. You know if you've read these lectures, they've been published. At the cruelty of *Don Quixote*, and the fact that throughout the book, the reader is encouraged to laugh at the brutality that's visited on him and visited on Sancho.

Mark Danner: Cruelty was very much in his mind, and a lot of people have speculated that Pnin is pain, essentially.

Joyce Carol Oates: Oh pain, yeah.

Mark Danner: That the word is meant to evoke pain. He does describe him in the first page.

Joyce Carol Oates: It's the paragraph, I think.

Mark Danner: Yeah, it's sort of ideally bald in this ridiculous way with very small legs. He's not unlike the cockroach, actually, of Gregor Samsa. But, by the end of the novel, he's rather redeemed. There's a chapter in the middle in which he goes to a country house, which is all Russians of course, who are having this country house in New England. He suddenly becomes this suave, absolutely non-strange character.

Joyce Carol Oates: That's wonderful.

Mark Danner: A lot of it is kind of a reflection I think on cruelty, and how we judge people from the outside. On the other hand, Nabokov himself was very handsome, and was thought of as very handsome when he was young. I was thinking when you were talking about the non-democratic, his idea of beauty as non-democratic, or anti-democratic, and I was remembering my six-year-old, when she was about the age of little Albert. It was very obvious that she was fascinated by beauty. She had one babysitter, in particular, who had long blonde hair, big blue eyes, classically Scandinavianly beautiful, if you can say it that way. Gracie was completely fascinated, and taken with her, and started at her. I was struck at the time in thinking is there a kind of model that is in some way inherent, and I thought as you said that that his idea of beauty is anti-democratic, I just wrote in my notebook, "Beauty is anti-democratic."

Joyce Carol Oates: Beauty is sort of hardwired. When we're just born, we have neurons that attach themselves to faces, and probably the face, and also the long blonde hair, would be fascinating. When we get beyond that, sort of expand the sense of beauty so there can be a face that's conventionally ugly but can be very interesting.

Mark Danner: Oh, no question.

Joyce Carol Oates: But I think Pnin is unique in Nabokov's work. I think it's the most tender of his novels basically.

Mark Danner: I agree. It's the one most suffused with sympathy. There's no question.

Joyce Carol Oates: Sympathy, and the ending is so wonderful.

Joyce Carol Oates: My feeling about Nabokov is that he was actually deeply wounded, a very wounded person. It's like his heart is exposed, and so you don't want your heart exposed, so you put on this carapace of armor, of irony, of superiority, of language, of virtuosity and language, and you put this armor on so that your sensitive heart is hidden. But you see in some of the footnotes in "Pale Fire" it really comes out, he feels very deeply, but he doesn't want you to feel sorry for him. I don't want your pity, I really am very sensitive, but I don't want your pity.

Mark Danner: Do you think the wound is of exile.

Joyce Carol Oates: Yes, of his father's execution. Yeah. I think losing his language. He is deeply wounded.

Robert Hass: I think we have time for one more question.

Joyce Carol Oates: You started off talking about of hell, and about this nature of imprisonment. It paralleled your discussion about the brain and not being able to think for yourself. You mentioned also about our current digital age where a lot of things are kind of pushed on us. You've also written about boxing, which of course, a lot of boxers go through a lot of brain trauma. I'm just wondering about this nature of how to break away, and become creative, and individual. What do you do to kind of inject artistic energy into your life?

Joyce Carol Oates: Well, you could take the question in a very broad philosophical sense. Are we determined by our genetic inheritance and our environment? Or do we have some measure of free will? I think the more education, the more reading you do, the more you travel and meet people. We come from a position of being determined and easily manipulated, because we're easily brainwashed, we're easily addicted. This species is easily addicted to all sorts of things. So to break free of that hypnosis so to speak, you become educated. The idea of a civilization of education, you expand yourself through reading, through books, through professors, through taking courses, traveling, learning other languages. As you rise up in your consciousness, you have ever more freedom of will. Ever more freedom of choice, so that your choices become much more expansive. But if you stay in your own little tribe, and you're way down, and everything is narrow, and a library in your little town is just a tiny library, then you're not gonna have the same choices. My feeling is that it's basically a philosophical question of what one does with one's own inheritance.

Joyce Carol Oates: We're all determined to a degree genetically. Our environment shapes up, but we can change our environment and we can change our identities by acts of will.

Robert Hass: I'm not gonna say how the novel ends, but I wonder if when you began it, you knew this young woman and her lover, are trapped in this world. Did you know how you were gonna end the book when you started?

Joyce Carol Oates: Yes, I always know how the novels will end before I start them.

Robert Hass: Joyce Carol Oates, thank you.

Timothy Hampton: We hope you enjoyed this Berkeley Book Chat, and we encourage you to join us in person or via podcast for future programs in the series.