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The best suspense novels always have a teasing ambiguity about whether you can trust the characters at the center of their stories. Abby, the protagonist of Joyce Carol Oates's most recent novel of suspense *Pursuit*, can barely trust herself. At the start of the book she steps in front of a bus (whether on accident or on purpose is unclear) and is rushed to the hospital with a concussion. Willem, who Abby married only just the day before, stays faithfully by her side and hopes to discover the reason why she has such persistently disturbing nightmares. Abby's past is shrouded in secrecy as Willem has never met any of her
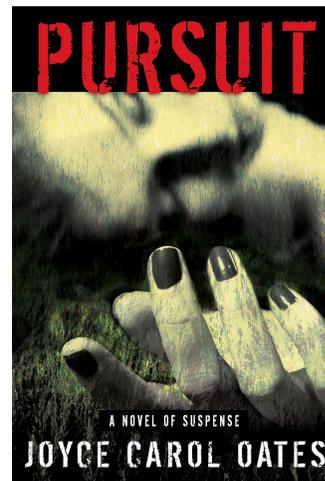
family and eventually learns that her birth name was entirely different from the one she presently uses.

What follows is the tale of Abby's self-invention born out of a violent upbringing and a broken home similar to that of Oates's previous novel *The Gravedigger's Daughter,* but here there is a gothic pallor to the atmosphere steeped in a consciousness so traumatized that Abby can scarcely separate fantasy from fact. There's a teasing ambiguity to this story which entrances the reader with its swift momentum as well as its chillingly precise psychological and physical details. In trying to free herself from the catastrophic destruction of her parents' marriage, Abby becomes tragically entombed within a fairy tale of her own creation.

There's an attentive detail to the vulnerability of girls and mothers as well as the domineering and controlling nature of certain paranoid male personalities. Early on Abby acquired strategies to placate men: "As a girl you learn not to offend strangers by rebuffing them. Especially men. Strangers, but also employers." This habitual silence is mirrored in the experience of Nicola, Abby's mother, who learns that speaking out about abuse and threats does nothing to protect her or her daughter because there isn't institutional support which can help her.

Yet Oates is also cognizant of the way violence is taught and bred into some men who enter the armed forces. Llewyn, Abby's father, is a war veteran who is haunted by memories where "Maybe he'd shot

(some of) the (Iraqi) enemy. So much confusion, he never knew... More than once it was kids they were shooting at, no more than thirteen years old. Moving targets. Just followed orders like everybody else, but even then sometimes he didn't—not much." Llewyn is someone trained to react violently against perceived enemies but he's also prone to manipulating the story he tells himself to suit his own outcome.

The novel dramatically shows how these social teachings and repetitive ways of thinking can lead to calamity and psychological breakdown. In some of Oates's recent fiction such as the novel *Hazards of Time Travel* and the short story "Fractal" the author has exhibited dualities in her storylines. Entirely different narratives coexist and compete for the reader's understanding of what is true. A similar strategy is taken in *Pursuit* where the reader is hauntingly left to wonder whose reality we're inhabiting. The world warps and the truth remains teasingly out of reach because the characters are so intent on reshaping their own stories. It is chilling and effective in its ability to disturb and leave the reader desperately searching for clues.