



The Falls

By Joyce Carol Oates
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Introduction

Is a relationship borne of a tragedy destined to the same fate? How much power does a place have over its inhabitants? Can a family, once unraveled, become whole again? These are the questions at the heart of *The Falls*, as Joyce Carol Oates unfolds the story of a family who must free themselves of the past in order to find solace and redemption.

It is June 1950, and Ariahe Erskine is on the brink of a new life. Niagara Falls is to be the site of an idyllic honeymoon, yet she finds herself married and widowed in the space of a day when her husband throws himself into the raging waters of The Falls. In a state of confusion, convinced her disastrous wedding night has played a part in her husband's decision to kill himself, "The Widow Bride of The Falls," as Ariahe comes to be known, keeps a relentless, seven-day vigil in the mist waiting for the recovery of his body.

At Ariahe's side throughout her ordeal is confirmed bachelor and pillar of the community Dirk Burnaby, a man whose own family understands first hand the treacherousness of The Falls. Dirk finds himself unexpectedly drawn to this plain, strange woman he has been asked to look after, and he falls in love with her though they barely exchange a word. When Ariahe leaves Niagara Falls, it is Dirk who pursues her across the state to reveal his passion for her.

Marrying Dirk once again brings Ariahe to Niagara Falls to begin a new marriage and a new life. As the years pass, Ariahe and Dirk create a seemingly perfect existence for their family. But the tragedy that began their life together shadows them, eventually eroding their happiness with distrust, greed, and even murder.

In the end, it is Dirk and Ariahe's three children who are forced to deal with their parents' legacy of dark secrets, unresolved emotions, and cruel truths. Chandler, Royall, and Juliet Burnaby each seek their answers in a different way. What they discover not only helps them come to terms with their loss, but their mother as well.

Against the mythic-historic backdrop of Niagara Falls in the mid-twentieth century, Joyce Carol Oates explores what happens when the richly interwoven relationships of parents and their children are challenged by circumstances from outside the family -- and also from within. Displaying the "impossibly lush and dead-on imaginative powers" (*Los Angeles Times*) and "mastery of storytelling" (*Newsweek*) for which Oates has been praised, *The Falls* illustrates how a place can be as alive as the people who inhabit it.

Discussion Questions

1. Compare Ariahe's respective relationships with Gilbert and Dirk, and her reasons for marrying each man.
2. Ariahe is deeply impacted by her brief marriage to Gilbert -- their lack of love for one another, their disastrous wedding night, his suicide. How do the physical and psychological circumstances of her first marriage echo throughout her marriage to Dirk?
3. What attracts Dirk to Ariahe when he meets her during her seven-day vigil at The Falls? If they had met under different circumstances would Dirk have fallen in love with her?
4. In the days before Gilbert's body is recovered, Ariahe "refused to behave as others wished her to behave." In what other ways throughout the story does she defy society's conventions and her family's expectations?
5. Chart the unraveling of Dirk and Ariahe's relationship. Is there a specific moment when they begin to grow apart, or is it a gradual process? Is one more at fault than the other?
6. After months of avoiding Nina Olshaker, what motivates Dirk to take her case? Why does he continue the case even when it begins to jeopardize his marriage, his professional standing, his livelihood, and his friendships?
7. What is your opinion of Ariahe as a mother, both before and after Dirk's death? Describe her relationship with each child and how it relates to the family as a whole. In what ways is each of Ariahe's children similar to -- and different from -- her?
8. Why do you suppose Ariahe chose to remain in Niagara Falls after Dirk's death, a place that had claimed the lives of her two husbands?
9. Chandler, Royall, and Juliet each feel compelled to find out the circumstances surrounding their father's death. What drives each one to go on such a quest, and what is gained by it?
10. Discuss the many references to suicide -- including Gilbert's death, Juliet's attempt, and the story of the dairy maid -- and their significance in the story.
11. Why does the family decide to hold a memorial service for Dirk nearly two decades after this death? Why does Ariahe at first refuse to attend and then change her mind?
12. What is Joyce Carol Oates saying about the nature of families in *The Falls*? Are the Burnabys a typical family?

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 has written some of the most enduring fiction of our time, including the national bestsellers *We Were the Mulvaney's* and *Blonde*, which was nominated for the National Book Award. She is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University and has been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters since 1978. In 2003 she received the Common Wealth Award for Distinguished Service in Literature and the Kenyon Review Award for Literary Achievement.