



Big Mouth & Ugly Girl

By Joyce Carol Oates
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Introduction

Matt Donaghy has always been a Big Mouth. But it's never gotten him in trouble — until the day Matt is accused of threatening to blow up Rocky River high School.

Ursula Riggs has always been an Ugly Girl. A loner with fierce, staring eyes, Ursula has no time for petty high school stuff like friends and dating — or at least that's what she tells herself. Ursula is content with minding her own business. And she doesn't even really know Matt Donaghy.

But Ursula is the only person who knows what Matt really said that day ... and she is the only one who can help him.

Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss the situation in the school when Matt was first accused of threatening to blow it up. Do you think Mr. Parrish was right to call the police? What perpetuated the gossip and how do you think the adults involved could have handled the situation better? Do you think something like this could happen in your school?
2. What do you think caused Ursula to stand up for Matt? After she helps, why do you think she avoids him?
3. Discuss the relationship that Matt and Ursula have with their families. What are the similarities and differences? How do these family relationships change through the course of the novel? How do these people grow within the novel?
4. Discuss Ursula and Matt's friendship. How do these two characters change throughout the novel? What effect did Ursula and Matt have on each other? What would their relationship be like if Matt had never been accused?
5. Matt and Ursula begin their friendship over email. Many times they hit the Cancel instead of Send key and say "easier that way." Why do they say this? What role does email play in the development of their friendship?
6. The Donaghys decide to file a lawsuit. What factors do you think helped them make this decision? How did it effect Matt? Ursula said she thought "asking for money made everything so cheap somehow." Do you agree?
7. Discuss the role the media played. How did the coverage perpetuate the tensions and gossip in the school and in the town? Can you think of any examples of how something like this really could or did happen in your local news?
8. Discuss Matt's relationships with his friends before he was accused. How did Matt's friends react after he was questioned by the police and suspended? Do you feel they betrayed him? Why or why not?
9. Ursula and Matt both make the same comment several times in the novel: "I will not give up." Why is this such a strong statement? Discuss how and when they both use this statement throughout the book.
10. Do you think Matt and Ursula see themselves as Big Mouth and Ugly Girl at the end of the novel.

About the author

Joyce Carol Oates is the renowned author of many novels, including the National Book Award finalist and *New York Times* best-seller *Blonde*. A recipient of the National Book Award and the PEN/Malamud Lifetime Achievement Award for Excellence in Short Fiction, Ms. Oates is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University. She lives in Princeton, New Jersey.