

A GUIDE TO TEACHING

After the Wreck, I Picked Myself Up,
Spread My Wings, and Flew Away

BY JOYCE CAROL OATES

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
Joyce Carol Oates

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Joyce Carol Oates has produced some of the most controversial, and lasting, fiction of our time. In her novels for young adults, she explores compelling topics of abuse, coming-of-age, friendship, loyalty, betrayal, and family. The questions in this guide are intended to spark lively discussion about the issues raised in her latest thought-provoking book.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Driving over the Tappan Zee Bridge one afternoon, Jenna and her mother see something in the road ahead of them. Swerving to miss it, they crash through the railing—leaving their car dangling above the Hudson River. Jenna survives, but without her mother her life is changed forever. After she recovers, Jenna chooses to live with her aunt Caroline instead of her father and his new family. She tries to adjust to her new school and family but ends up shutting herself off from everybody except Crow, the mysterious older boy who seems to rescue her every time she is in danger. After a visit to the emergency room for a drug overdose and a trip to the police station as a witness to her best friend's rape and assault, Jenna realizes her choices are endangering her life. It is Crow who eventually helps Jenna understand the reason behind her choices, allowing her to finally heal both physically and emotionally.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the opening chapters, Jenna allows the reader inside her mind to feel the pain, confusion, and frustration that she is experiencing. On page 11, Jenna learns her life has been saved by surgery. She says, "Saved for what, don't ask." Does Jenna want to be saved? Why or why not?
2. Throughout the novel Jenna enjoys floating "in the blue" by using both prescribed and illegal drugs. Where is "in the blue"? Why is it easier for her to be "in the blue" instead of "in the raw" (p. 38)? What comparisons can be made between the two? What impact does being "in the blue" have on her life?
3. Many times throughout the book, Jenna refers to experiences in her life as *before the wreck* and *after the wreck*. For example, on page 22, Jenna talks about how she relates to people, and again on page 26, she talks about running. In what other ways does Jenna's life change, both physically and mentally, in her recovery process? What changes are permanent?



4. Although Jenna hates rehab, she knows she needs it. She says on pages 45 and 48, “Rehab! Sounds so good, positive. But when you’re ‘in rehab’ it’s hell.” Based on what Jenna says about rehab in part 1, chapter 16, it’s actually two kinds of hell. What evidence supports this view of rehab?
5. *After the wreck*, Jenna is determined to never be hurt again (p. 61). How do the people in her life continue to hurt her? How does Crow show her that it isn’t the perfect people you love, it’s the people you know that you love (p. 233)? Jenna finally accepts that throughout life she will hurt others, and that others will hurt her. At what point in the book does the reader realize this?
6. When Jenna mails the paperweight that she stole back to Dr. Freer, she writes her apology on lemons (p. 233). Why is this easier for her? Why does she choose lemons instead of another fruit? Why did she steal the paperweight?
7. Jenna’s aunt and uncle are convinced that she has a drug problem. What evidence do they have to support this? Does Jenna think she has a drug problem? Why or why not?
8. After Jenna walks across the footbridge with Crow’s help, she is convinced she is in love with him (p. 285). Are her feelings genuine? How does he feel about her?
9. When Jenna finally remembers the wreck and that a hawk had been on the bridge, she is both relieved and thrilled to know that she did not cause the wreck or her mother’s death. Is Crow right in telling her to keep what she remembers about the cause of the wreck to herself (p. 282)? Does his explanation for her silence make sense (p. 283)? Should Jenna follow his advice? Why or why not?
10. How is the title of the book both symbolic and literal?

THEMATIC QUESTIONS

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

1. Jenna says on page 13, “*Before the wreck* was my old, lost life. *Before the wreck* was the other side of the bridge.” Throughout the book, Jenna attempts to reach wholeness *after the wreck*. How does her crossing the footbridge over Sable Creek symbolize the journey she has traveled to reach wholeness? Why does she feel giddy, exhilarated (p. 282)?



COMING OF AGE

2. In chapter 1, Jenna talks about being a snow goose, flying high above the world, trying to save her life, and on page 292, remembering what Crow once told her, she says, “The geese migrate north to a colder climate. It’s a sign of spring.” In what other places in the book do they appear? What do the geese symbolize? How does the imagery of the flying geese mirror Jenna’s experience in the year after the wreck?

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

3. Jenna has no choice but to live with a “new” family—her aunt Caroline’s or her father’s—and either choice will bring certain adjustments and changes into everyone’s life. Why does she make the choice to live with her aunt Caroline? What role does her father play in her recovery? Does her relationship with her father change throughout the story? Why or why not?

FRIENDSHIP

4. Jenna is warned by Crow and by Ryan that she should not hang out with Trina, but she ignores their advice. Why is Jenna so insistent on being friends with Trina and her group? Why does Trina choose to be friends with Jenna? What does Jenna learn from her relationship with Trina? How does Jenna prove that she is a true friend to Trina?

TRUST

5. Jenna does not trust anyone in her life who wants to help her, including the people who love her. On page 106, Jenna says, “A secret life is the sweetest life. Also the safest.” How does she eventually learn to trust again? Why is she so quick to tell Crow what happened when she wouldn’t tell anyone else (p. 215)?

COPING WITH LOSS/GRIEF

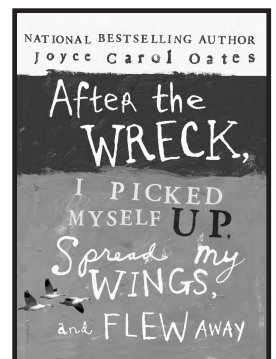
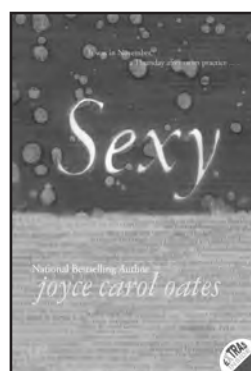
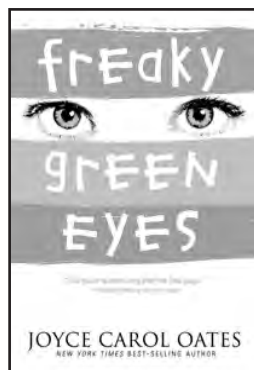
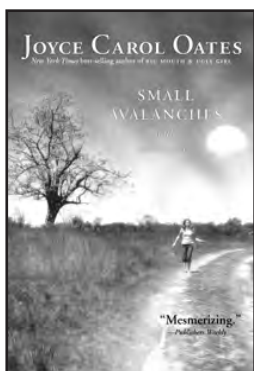
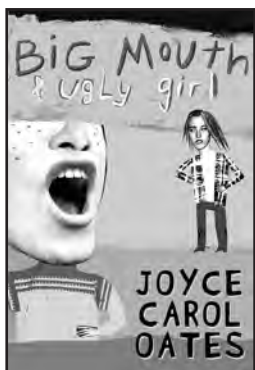
6. Jenna desperately misses her mother; she has dreams about her and nightmares about the wreck. Jenna blames herself and feels guilt to such a degree that she thinks she was meant to die with her mom (p. 273). She instinctively knows her mother would not approve of her choices regarding drugs and friends, and she can almost hear her mother say, “Jenna, this isn’t like you. Jenna, what is happening?” (p. 195). How does Jenna work through the grief of losing her mother?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

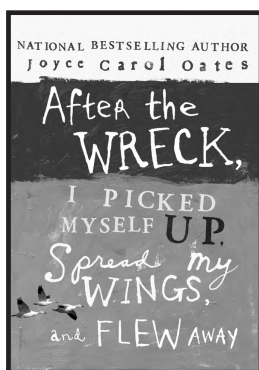


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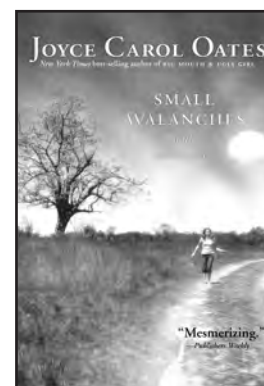
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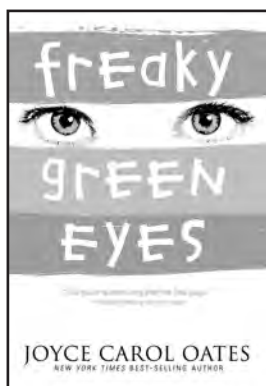


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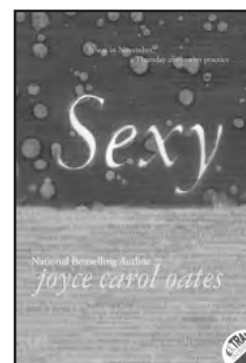
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