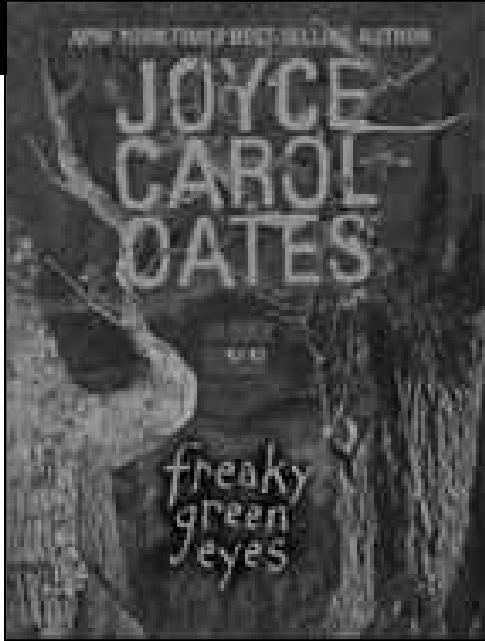


A Guide to Teaching Joyce Carol Oates

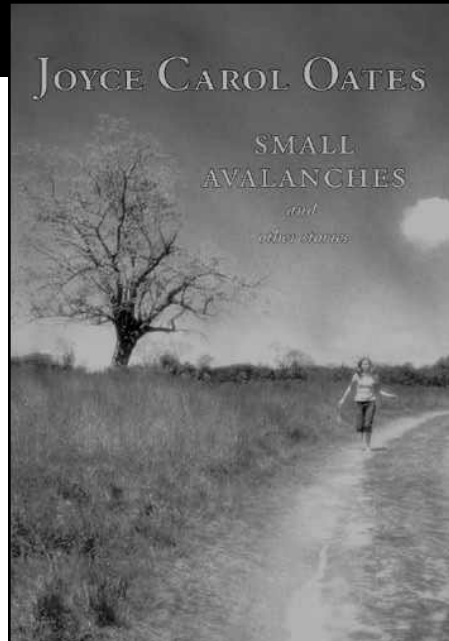
FREAKY GREEN EYES • BIG MOUTH & UGLY GIRL
SMALL AVALANCHES AND OTHER STORIES

Young Adult Literature



FREAKY GREEN EYES

Tr 0-06-623759-9
Lb 0-06-623757-2



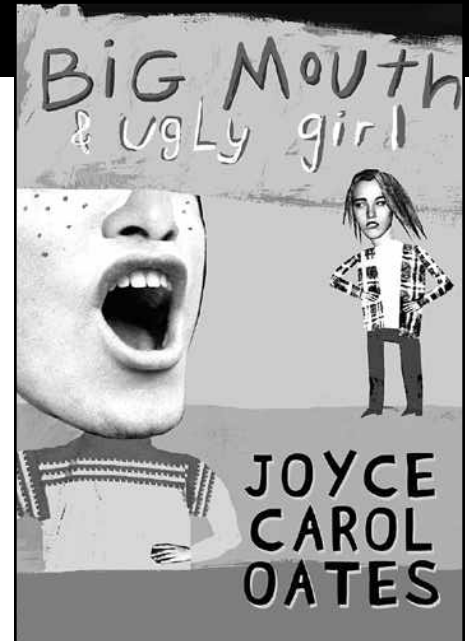
SMALL AVALANCHES AND OTHER STORIES

Tr 0-06-001217-X
Lb 0-06-001218-8
Pb 0-06-001219-6

(Pb Available in February 2004)

“Haunting images, masterfully controlled language, the occasional light touch of fantasy, and no easy lessons.”
—*Kirkus Review* (starred review)

“Oates makes poetry with ordinary words that take readers right into the restless psyches of young women.”
—*ALA Booklist* (starred review)



BIG MOUTH & UGLY GIRL

Tr 0-06-623756-4
Lb 0-06-623758-0
Pb 0-06-447347-3
Au 0-06-008969-5

- School Library Journal Best Book
- ALA Booklist Editors' Choice
- ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

“A thought-provoking, character-driven drama.” —*ALA Booklist* (starred review)

“Believable, full-blooded characters. Convincing high-school backdrop.”
—*Publisher Weekly* (starred review)

“A fast-moving, timely, compelling story.”
—*School Library Journal*



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 and betrayal, and family. The questions in this guide are intended to spark lively discussion about the issues raised in these thought provoking books.

FREAKY GREEN EYES

About the Book

Fifteen-year-old Franky discovers her inner strength as she deals with her parents' separation and her father's escalating psychological abuse of Franky and her younger sister, Samantha. When Franky finds her mother's hidden journal, clearly addressing her mother's fear for her own safety, Franky steps forward and testifies against her father, the one person who she had thought loved her.

Subjects/Themes: Coming-of-Age, Death, Family Violence, Fathers and Daughters, Mothers and Daughters, Murder, Physical Abuse, Psychological Abuse, Self-esteem, Stepfamilies.

Pre-Reading Activity

Franky lives in a tense family environment with a domineering father. She feels she has little control of her own life until she fights back when an older boy tries to sexually assault her at a party. She realizes the depth of her inner strength and that she can stand up for herself. She calls this newfound part of herself Freaky Green Eyes. Have students discuss events in their lives that caused them to realize the depth of their inner strength. How does this realization affect the way they interact with people?

Discussion Questions

1. When Cameron tried to force himself on Franky she fiercely fought back. Cameron told her that she was crazy, that her eyes had become wild—freaky green eyes. Rather than upsetting Franky, the realization that she could fight back empowered her. She said to herself, "*You belong in this world, just like everyone else. Except maybe Freaky Green Eyes so you know 'it*" (p. 70). What does Franky mean by this?
2. Franky is concerned about her parents getting a divorce, especially when her mother begins fixing up the cabin in Skagit Harbor and spends more and more time there. She e-mails her older stepbrother, Todd, asking for reassurance that everything is okay with their family. Todd does not respond. What type of response would she have gotten from Todd if he had taken the time to e-mail back? Would it have been the reassuring response Franky needed to hear? Why or why not?
3. Franky's father, famous sports commentator Reid Pierson, orders a lavish Chinese dinner to celebrate his new job contract. He tries to act in a jovial fashion with his children, but inside he is fuming because his wife is not there. Where is she, and why is Mr. Pierson so upset by her absence? What does he think of her new group of friends or her creative endeavors?
4. Due to his celebrity status, Reid Pierson has met many politicians, including then president Bill Clinton. He was very impressed by Clinton's charisma. He tells his children, "You couldn't help but love that man. You can see why, if people love you enough, they'll forgive you anything" (p 66). How does this comment relate to Mr. Pierson's actions toward his own wife and children? How does Mr. Pierson manipulate Franky and her sister, Samantha, into forgiving him for his recurring abusive behavior? What do you think "love" means to Reid Pierson?
5. Franky's mother physically escapes from her abusive husband by moving to Skagit Harbor, but Mrs. Pierson knows she is still in danger. What does she leave behind to incriminate Mr. Pierson in her death? Where does Franky find it? How does this discovery change Franky's impression of her father?
6. During a Fourth of July fireworks display, Franky slips away and releases the wild animals that the sons of her father's friend have trapped in cages. Franky says she is not sorry she let them go. Her father demands she apologize. Franky refuses. He becomes furious and storms at her, "Apologize to these people, Francesca, or I'll break every bone in your miserable body!" (p 125). Would Reid Pierson have made good on his threat if their host had not pulled his hand off Franky's arm? Does Mr. Pierson make idle threats?
7. Franky saw a whole new side to her mother when she and Samantha visited the Skagit Harbor cabin. Her mother dressed in jeans or shorts and was brimming with energy. Franky thought she looked free. Why was their mother such a different person while living at the cabin? How was she different from the mother they saw in the family home in Seattle?
8. When the police interviewed Franky for the second time about her mother and father's relationship, she said that she had known her mother was being abused. She knew her mother wore scarves and long sleeves to hide the bruises. Franky had found it easier to blame her mother and convince herself that that her mother provoked her father into hurting her. What does Franky mean when she tells the police officer, "It was easier to hate her" (p 306)?
9. Todd once cared about Franky's mother but now at age twenty he hates her. How did Mrs. Pierson react to Todd's change in behavior? Why do you think Todd became so negative toward his stepmother?
10. Todd sets up a website to support his father's innocence after Mr. Pierson is convicted of his wife's murder. What influence do you think this website will have on Reid Pierson's release from prison? How does Franky feel about this website?

BIG MOUTH & UGLY GIRL

About the Book

Through the alternating perspectives of teenagers Matt (Big Mouth) and Ursula (Ugly Girl), Oates explores the repercussions of a false accusation of a bomb threat in a wealthy suburban New York City high school. Matt's sarcastic joke in the school cafeteria is reported to the principal and the drama begins. Ursula steps forward and defends Matt's innocence. Rumors flare and Matt is ostracized, which in turn forces Ursula out of her self-imposed solitude as she helps Matt cope.

Subjects/Themes: Family Relationships, Friendship, High Schools, Ostracism, Mothers and Daughters, Self-perception.

Pre-Reading Activity

The two main characters in this book, Ursula Riggs and Matt Donaghy, become friends after Matt is accused of threatening to set a bomb off in the school. Oates explores the repercussions this rumor has in both the high school and the community. Have students discuss the long-term effects of a false accusation on a student. Ask them to discuss how they think their school or community would react to such an incident.

Discussion Questions

1. How could the result of someone overhearing a joke in the high school cafeteria get so out of hand? Who misinterpreted what they heard Matt say in the cafeteria, and what did they do about it? Why did this willful misinterpretation occur? Do Matt's friends stand behind him?
2. Matt is interrogated at police headquarters. Why does Matt begin to understand how people crack under interrogation and admit to things they didn't do? How does this experience affect his attitude toward authority?
3. How does Ursula justify her mother's not coming to her basketball games but making sure she gets Lisa to her dance rehearsals? Does the difference between big-boned Ursula and her dainty little sister have anything to do with Ursula's secret name for herself? What other incidents in her life have caused Ursula to become Ugly Girl?
4. Ursula barely knows Matt, but she comes forward and testifies on his behalf. Her mother does not want her to get involved in the situation. How does Ursula's honesty and support of Matt affect her family's standing in the community?
5. This experience has profoundly affected Matt. He overhears his mother say, "He isn't a boy any longer. He has changed." (p. 109). How would a conversation with Matt be different than before the rumors about him ran rampant through the school?
6. Ursula feels she has found a word that perfectly describes her—"truculent." What does truculent mean, and why does she think it is synonymous with Ugly Girl?
7. Matt's parents decide to sue the school for defamation of character, resulting in a level of community and school animosity against them that escalates. A group of high school boys corner Matt and knock him down the stairs. His family receives threatening phone calls and letters. How do Matt's mother and father respond to the community's reaction to the lawsuit? Which of them do you think is having more difficulty with the ostracism, and why?
8. When Matt tells his father he does not want revenge, his father says it is too late. He shouts at Matt, "We're in this too far to back out. My name is at stake—my integrity. Just remember, you got us into this—with your idiotic sense of humor" (p. 200). What type of thoughts may be going through Matt's mind when he hears his father say this to him? Does his father really think it is Matt's fault? How would you react to such a statement by your father?
9. Ugly Girl is a persona Ursula slips into, as when she steps out onto the basketball court. How does this aggressive side of Ursula influence her basketball performance and her teammates' response to her on and off of the court?
10. Being with Matt has a positive influence on Ursula's self-image. She begins to believe people actually like her. Eventually she and Matt become a couple. How does their relationship affect the way she is seen at school? Does this change in her social standing affect her need to be Ugly Girl?



SMALL AVALANCHES AND OTHER STORIES

About the Book

These short stories explore the turbulent psyches of twelve very different female characters, from the naïve girl in “The Sky Blue Ball” playing catch with an unseen partner on the other side of a wall to a young woman disillusioned by what she thinks is her part in the suicide of a disturbed young man. Each of the stories poignantly portrays the tumultuous feelings a female experiences as she finds herself at the brink of womanhood, often unaware of how her actions affect those around her.

Themes/Subjects : Coming-of-Age, Family Relationships, Friendship, Sexual Awakenings.

Pre-Reading Activity

The twelve short stories in this collection are about females, from young adolescents to young women ready to enter college. Although quite different in age and life experiences, these females have one thing in common—they have begun to realize the impact their behavior can have on themselves and others in their world. Their experiences change some of them from children to teenagers, others from adolescents to adults. Have students discuss events in their lives that awakened the realization that they were no longer children.

Discussion Questions

1. Oates titles the short story about Icy, Orchid, and Crystal “Bad Girls.” Did the three sisters break into their mother’s boyfriend’s apartment because they are bad? If not, why do you think they broke in? Did they find what they were looking for? What were the long-term effects of their break-in?
2. The girl in “Shot” feels so sorry for a chained-up dog that she calls the ASPCA and the police. But she doesn’t try to find out if they responded to her calls. She realizes there isn’t anything else she have done to help the dog. Afterward, “she heard dogs barking. In the distance. Any number of dogs. For the world was filled with barking dogs after all”(p. 189). What does Oates mean by this last line in the story? Is she actually referring to dogs?
3. Claire, in “Why Don’t You Come Live With Me It’s Time,” experiences insomnia. One night she decides to cross the Ferry Street Bridge to visit her grandmother. Her late-night journey includes climbing up onto a bridge beam and squat walking her way across with the river roaring below her. Her fear of falling into the river becomes so great, she cannot move. She is paralyzed by her fear. At the end of the story, the reader assumes that Claire gets home via the same bridge. Do you think Claire overcame her fear and crossed the bridge to get home? Was the fear so great that she lost memory of crossing it? How else might the story end?
4. Barbara Burhman, the main character in “Life After High School,” is nicknamed Sunny for her “astonishing smile”(p 218). What happens in this story to wipe the smile from Sunny’s face so that she refuses to use the nickname ever again? How did this event change her view of the world?
5. Lisanne initially refuses to visit her grandmother in “The Visit.” Why does she fear visiting her grandmother? What is so disturbing to Lisanne about where her grandmother lives? Are her mother’s fears of the same nature?
6. In “The Model,” Sybil agrees to model for the eccentric Mr. Starr. As he draws her in various poses in the park, he asks probing questions about her family. He seems to know more about her than he should. Why does Sybil feel a strange connection to him? What effect do her encounters with Mr. Starr have on her relationship with her aunt? What does she decide to do when she discovers who he is? Why do you think she makes this decision? What would you have done?
7. The girl in “The Sky Blue Ball,” is walking beside a brick wall when a ball comes flying over it. Would you have thrown the ball back over the wall as the girl does? Why do you think she climbed over the wall to find the child she thought she was playing with? Was there a child to be found? If not, what might have happened to her?
8. In the short story “Capricorn,” Melanie begins an on-line relationship with a man. When he asks her what she looks like, she describes her cousin Stephanie. Stephanie has the long blond hair and body that catch men’s attention. Does Melanie ever tell Stephanie about her lie? When he shows up at the tennis courts, why is Melanie jealous? How does her jealousy change at the end of the story?
9. In “Small Avalanches,” Nancy plays a cat-and-mouse game with the man who follows her from her uncle’s gas station. At first Nancy is scared, but then she realizes she has the upper hand in this situation. What does Nancy do to her pursuer? Why do you think she takes pleasure in his discomfort? Does she feel any remorse?
10. Before reading “How I Contemplated the World From the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again,” did you have an image of what the main character would be like? Did you think she would be the daughter of a wealthy businessman? Why do you think she took pleasure in stealing rather than buying things she could certainly afford? How does she feel about returning home?

