



The Falls: A Novel

By Joyce Carol Oates



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A stunning, major achievement from Joyce Carol Oates, "one of the great artistic forces of our time" (*The Nation*). A haunting story of the powerful spell Niagara Falls casts upon two generations of a family, leading to tragedy, love, loss, and, ultimately, redemption.

A man climbs over the railings and plunges into Niagara Falls. A newlywed, he has left behind his wife, Ariahe Erskine, in the honeymoon suite the morning after their wedding. "The Widow Bride of The Falls," as Ariahe comes to be known, begins a relentless, seven-day vigil in the mist, waiting for his body to be found. At her side throughout, confirmed bachelor and pillar of the community Dirk Burnaby is unexpectedly transfixed by the strange, otherworldly gaze of this plain, strange woman, falling in love with her though they barely exchange a word. What follows is their passionate love affair, marriage, and children -- a seemingly perfect existence.

But the tragedy by which their life together began shadows them, damaging their idyll with distrust, greed, and even murder. What unfurls is a drama of parents and their children; of secrets and sins; of lawsuits, murder, and, eventually, redemption. As Ariahe's children learn that their past is enmeshed with a hushed-up scandal involving radioactive waste, they must confront not only their personal history but America's murky past: the despoiling of the landscape, and the corruption and greed of the massive industrial expansion of the 1950s and 1960s.

Set against the mythic-historic backdrop of Niagara Falls, Joyce Carol Oates explores the American family in crisis, but also America itself in the mid-twentieth century. As in *We Were the Mulvaney's*, a "darkly engrossing novel" (*Washington Post Book World*), she examines what happens when the richly interwoven relationships of parents and their children are challenged by circumstances outside the family.

The Falls is a love story gone wrong and righted, and it alone places Joyce Carol Oates definitively in the company of the great American novelists.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Oates is not only on her authentically rendered home ground in this sprawling novel set in the city of Niagara Falls during the 1950s, she is also writing at the top of her form. Her febrile prose is especially appropriate to a story as turbulent as the tumultuous waters that have claimed many lives over the years. Widowed on her wedding night when her new husband, a young minister and latent homosexual, throws himself into the falls, Ariaah Littrell, the plain, awkward daughter of a minister, henceforth considers herself damned. Her bleak future becomes miraculously bright when Dirk Burnaby, a handsome, wealthy bon vivant with an altruistic heart, falls in love with the media-dubbed Widow-Bride. Their rapturous happiness is shadowed only by Ariaah's illogical conviction over the years that Dirk will leave her and their three children someday. Her unreasonable fear becomes self-fulfilling when her increasingly unstable behavior, combined with Dirk's obsessed but chaste involvement with Nina Olshaker, a young mother who enlists his help in alerting the city fathers to the pestilential conditions in the area later to be known as Love Canal, opens a chasm in their marriage. His gentle heart inspired by a need for justice, Dirk takes on the powerful, corrupt politicians, his former peers and pals, in a disastrous lawsuit that ruins him socially and financially and results in his death. Oates adroitly addresses the material of this "first" class action lawsuit and makes the story fresh and immediate. "In the end, all drama is about family," a character muses, and while the narrative occasionally lapses into melodrama in elucidating this theme, Oates spins a haunting story in which nature and humans are equally rapacious and self-destructive.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

The Falls reads like a 19th-century epic, with echoes of the gothic. Some critics saw this approach as melodramatic; others called it sublime. Both celebrated and criticized for her prolific output (she has more than 50 books to her name), Oates is well known for probing the psychological depths of her characters, as she did in *We Were the Mulvaney's* and *Blonde*. This novel is no exception. Despite general praise (after all, most of Oates's works are small masterpieces), the consensus is it's not her most powerful novel. While the plot may grip some readers, the book will likely appeal to those who enjoy depth of character development, interesting (if, at times, overdone) prose, and a brave, brave ending.

In our Book by Book Profile of Joyce Carol Oates in our May/June 2003 issue, Jessica Teisch wrote: "*Where to Start*: A daunting task, as Oates has been prolific across numerous genres and media. Oates is a master of the short story, and *Where are You Going, Where Have You Been?* is a collection of some of her best work. For classic Oates, turn to *Them*. For Oates with a dash of hope, try *We Were the Mulvaney's*."

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From [Booklist](#)

From Oates' fevered imagination comes a sprawling, ambitious novel with enough material to fill several books. The thoroughly absorbing story line tracks 30 years in the life of the Burnabys as they struggle to juggle the competing demands of family and community. After Ariaah Erskine's young husband commits suicide on their honeymoon by throwing himself into the roaring waters of Niagara Falls, she forms an intense relationship with local lawyer Dirk Burnaby, marries him two months later, and eventually bears three children. But their marriage founders when Dirk succumbs to the pleading of a local woman whose family has been sickened by their poisoned neighborhood in Love Canal. Dirk, a longtime member of the patrician ruling class, underestimates the lengths to which his colleagues will go to protect their business

interests and pays the ultimate price when he faces down the powers-that-be in court. Twenty years later, his sons will take up his cause and mend their broken family in the process. This passionate, compulsively readable novel displays the full range of Oates' singular obsessions--the destructiveness of secrets; eccentric female characters given to rapacious appetites and volatile emotions; and the mysterious way that human emotion is mirrored in the natural world. Vivid and memorable reading from the madly prolific Oates.

Joanne Wilkinson

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Leroy Torres:

Why don't make it to become your habit? Right now, try to ready your time to do the important act, like looking for your favorite publication and reading a book. Beside you can solve your short lived problem; you can add your knowledge by the guide entitled *The Falls: A Novel*. Try to make book *The Falls: A Novel* as your close friend. It means that it can to be your friend when you truly feel alone and beside regarding course make you smarter than ever before. Yeah, it is very fortunated for you. The book makes you more confidence because you can know anything by the book. So , we should make new experience and knowledge with this book.

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Joseph Haner:

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