

# them

by Joyce Carol Oates

## StoryLines Midwest Discussion Guide No. 10

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### About the author

Joyce Carol Oates was born in Lockport, New York in 1938. Though most well-known for her more than 30 novels and abundant short fiction, she continues to produce work in all major genres. Her writing has repeatedly been nominated for major prizes, including the Pulitzer. Besides the National Book Award for *them* (1970), she has won the Rosenthal Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, an O. Henry Special Award for Continuing Achievement (twice), a Guggenheim fellowship, and many other honors. Several of Oates's works have been adapted for film, including *Smooth Talk* (1985), based on the short story, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" She and her husband, Raymond Smith, edit *The Ontario Review*. Since 1978 she has taught at Princeton University, where she is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor.

### Discussion questions

Race relations and the riots of 1967 were very much on Oates's mind when she wrote *them*, yet she let the clash between blacks and whites remain in the background, focusing instead on a family of poor whites. Why do you think she made this choice?

Do comments about race made by the members of the Wendell family, especially Loretta, come from direct experience? Can we write off some of Loretta's rhetoric as "just talk," part of her blustery personality? Does that make it more forgivable? Do Loretta's opinions about blacks change over the span of the novel?

How do "private selves, accidents and casualties" add up to a public violence? In *them*? In other situations in contemporary life?

How does Oates's portrayal of the social turmoil during the 1960s mesh with your memories? If you're younger, how does *them* correspond to your understanding of that time?

### Additional readings

Joyce Carol Oates. *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1967.  
*Bellefleur*, 1980.  
*Raven's Wing* (stories), 1986.  
*You Must Remember This*, 1987.  
*Because It is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*, 1990.  
*Twelve Plays*, 1991.  
*Black Water*, 1992.  
*Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: Selected Early Stories*, 1993.  
*On Boxing* (essay), 1994.  
*What I Lived For*, 1994.  
*Will You Always Love Me? and Other Stories*, 1995.  
*We Were the Mulvaney's*, 1996.  
*Where I've Been and Where I'm Going: Essays, Reviews and Prose*, 1999.  
*Blonde*, 2000.  
*Faithless: Tales of Transgression* (stories), 2001.

StoryLines America is supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and administered by the American Library Association to expand American understanding of human experience and cultural heritage. Additional support from Barnes & Noble  
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by Joyce Carol Oates

*One warm evening in August 1937 a girl in love stood before a mirror. Her name was Loretta. It was her reflection in the mirror she loved, and out of this dreamy, pleasing love there arose a sense of excitement that was restless and blind—which way would it move, what would happen?*

Within hours, sixteen-year-old Loretta will take a lover, see him murdered in her bed, and be swept up by the man who will become her husband—a breathless start to an ambitious, high-energy novel. Oates wrote *them* (1969) in the aftermath of the Detroit riots of 1967, intending it to be the last of a loose trilogy of novels about the “class wars” in America. *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967) and *Expensive People* (1967) preceded it—she later added *Wonderland* (1971).

“*them*, as literature, is a reimagining, a reinventing of the urban American experience of the last 30 years, a complex and powerful novel that begins with James T. Farrell and ends in a gothic dream,” wrote *New York Times* reviewer John Leonard. “*them* is really about all the private selves, accidents and casualties that add up to a public violence.”

Readers of her more-recent fiction will find many of Oates’s fascinations already in evidence in *them*. Like *You Must Remember This* (1987) and *We Were the Mulvaneys* (1996), *them* chronicles a family; like *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* (1990) it examines race against an urban backdrop. Like the majority of her novels and short stories, it asks how violence arises (especially violence against women) and what its lasting effects are. *them* won the National Book Award in 1970 and has remained in print ever since.

About the book’s curious, uncapitalized title, Oates says this:

*[it] came to me as inspiration, with its sly suggestion that there is in fact a them and an us; in our democratic nation, a category of them at*

*whom we can gaze with pity, awe, revulsion, moral superiority, as if across an abyss; a them not entirely civilized, yet eager to “rise” in class; a them who constitute the ideal, impressionable, ever-naïve and ever-hopeful consumers of American dream-products. The them of the novel are poor white, separated by race (and racist) distinctions from their near neighbors, poor blacks and Hispanics.*

The novel tracks Loretta through her marriage to policeman Howard Wendell, the births of her children Jules, Maureen, and Betty, and Howard’s disgrace and the family’s migration from Ohio to a poor section of Detroit. Loretta dominates these early pages, and she’s a tough cookie. Some readers will find her a hard character to like—crude-mouthed, distrustful, riddled with unexamined angers and racist sentiments about the poor blacks of Detroit.

After Howard is killed in an industrial accident, Loretta marries Pat Furlong; stubbornly resilient, she keeps her life going, her family afloat. As Maureen says much later, Loretta is “always ready for the next day, always curious, cheerful, even in her complaints anxious to see what would happen next . . . ready to begin all over again.”

As we move into the 1950s, the novel turns to Loretta’s older two children, Jules and Maureen. In 1953, Jules is 15. He’s handsome, wild, increasingly street-smart and on-the-make, possessed of a natural sweetness and the capacity for complex emotions he struggles to master. He drifts away from school and finds work, toughening and coming of age over the next years. He becomes the driver for Bernard, a shady businessman, the first of several older men who offer an escape from his old life. He’s taught how to dress, how to act. But this episode in his life comes to an abrupt end with Bernard’s slaying.

In the meantime, Jules has caught sight of Bernard’s niece, Nadine. He thinks obsessively about her and the world of privilege she embodies. His relationship with Nadine proves complex and tragic—the account of their love affair is among the most incendiary in all of Oates’s writing. As the novel builds toward the riots of 1967, Jules becomes caught up in the radical politics of the time; in the street violence that ensues, he finds himself killing a policeman.

Loretta’s daughter, Maureen, has “a delicate, intelligent beauty,” Jules tells us. As a girl in Catholic school, she seems bright and conscientious, a “good” girl. She’s also increasingly inward and anxious, terrified of making mistakes, unable to understand why Loretta “hates” her. Maureen spends her evenings in the soothing silence of the library, but Loretta accuses her of fooling around, of being secretive.

As she enters the turmoil of high school, Maureen feels her life “coming undone,” and she begins to seem emotionally detached. After another flare-up at home, she vows to flee. Hoping to store up money for her getaway, she starts sleeping with an older man. When she’s found out, her stepfather administers a savage beating. Nearly two years later, she emerges from her nightmarish convalescence and begins to face adult life.

Oates and her husband, Raymond Smith, lived in Detroit for much of the 1960s while she taught at the University of Detroit. Detroit seemed “the quintessential American city”—a tantalizing puzzle for Oates the writer, source of turbulently mixed feelings. The Detroit we find in *them* is a place to be escaped, a place of stark racial and economic divisions, a place ready to burn. The great affluence of enclaves like Grosse Pointe is repeatedly contrasted to the dangerous, congested, polluted inner city, where even the air feels steeped in failure and exhaustion. Oates returns to this imagery again and again:

*Jules was driving a truck full of flowers around the unflowery streets of Detroit.*

*He could tell that the day was going to be another overcast day, a monotonous day. He was thirty-four years old and the sky of Detroit had burned its way into his brain, searing it with gloom and grit and something relentless, monotonous and powerful.*

Joyce Carol Oates remains one of the most forceful and prolific writers of her generation. Since publishing her first book of stories, *By the North Gate*, in 1963, she has averaged over two books a year, in a staggering array of genres—novels, short stories, poems, plays, essays, scholarship (as well as teaching, editing, and writing more novels under the name Rosamond Smith). Her work has been a relentless examination of American culture, especially its darker facets. She concludes in the Afterword to *them*:

*I have sometimes been criticized for not more explicitly judging my characters, of indicating what the “moral” or message of my work is. Does them condone violence, theft, deception, the “viciousness” of the poor? Is Jules Wendell the pimp/murderer a hero? Can victories be salvaged out of the ruins of others’ lives? These are questions the writer may ask herself, to which the work of fiction provides a complex, perhaps tragic answer.*