

WONDERLAND

by Joyce Carol Oates

Vanguard, 512 pp., \$7.95

Reviewed by Brian P. Hayes

■ Joyce Carol Oates doesn't pick at her characters' brains. Having escaped the fascination that motive and mental state have for other contemporary writers, she keeps the unfortunates who populate her novels so busy they have hardly a moment for introspection. Miss Oates tells what happens to her characters and what their experiences—usually terrible—do to them but she rarely explains what they are thinking about their plights.

In her later work Miss Oates has grown more and more withdrawn, and less willing to discuss what's inside peoples' minds. Since *A Garden of Earthly Delights* her technique has become ascetic, denying all indulgences, and her work has improved with each renunciation. *Wonderland*, her new book, surpasses even *them*, which in 1969 won a National Book Award.

In *Wonderland* the author has allowed her technique to become wholly empirical. Like a scientist who feels he must eliminate his own judgments from his experiments, Miss Oates has retreated to a vantage point well outside her story, and she relates only what she can be sure of from that aspect.

The story is that of a man named Jesse, and his personality is created with almost nothing having been said directly about him. He starts life as Jesse Harte, son of an upstate New York ne'er-do-well with a family that won't stop growing. After his down-trodden father runs amok with a shotgun and, in an act of violence that has become an Oates trademark, kills his wife and all but one of his children, Jesse, the lone survivor, is adopted and renamed Jesse Pedersen. The adoptive father is a doctor with an overweening ego, a patriarch consumed with foolhardy self-righteousness. He is grotesquely fat, as are his oppressed wife and two natural children.

Jesse loses this family, too, who disown him for his part in a pathetic rebellion; and again he changes his surname—this time to Vogel. Still a survivor, he becomes a prominent surgeon, marries, and has children.

Wonderland is about Jesse, but it doesn't always seem to be. The story concerns him only indirectly, deductively, by examining what he does to the people around him. Although Jesse never means any harm, he affects others in ugly ways. Those who especially bear his mark are the women closest to him—his mother, sister,

adoptive mother, first love, wife, daughters, and a woman who never quite becomes his mistress.

Hilda, his fat foster sister, who has problems of her own, says in fear, "You bring chaos in here. More than anyone else." Jesse sees "... the pity in his aunt's eyes that might have been pity for any freak." His wife realizes, a little late, that her husband "could not imagine her, had not the time to imagine her existence, and so he was destroying her."

Wonderland, therefore, is about Jesse only as he is perceived. Miss Oates seems well aware of the existentialist tenet on which that technique is based. She comments, on one of the few occasions when Jesse's thoughts are revealed: "It distressed Jesse that he must always exist in the eyes of others, their power extended in him though he did not choose them, did not choose them deliberately at all."

As an existentialist, a very special one who barely survived, Jesse is fraught with death. During his internship he reads a patient's chart and muses: "Here was a story, a short story not yet complete; when would it be complete? Death completed all these reports. A dismissal from the hospital was temporary and unsatisfying, really; only death put an end to questions of health and recovery." His daughter later echoes his view: "What is a complete thought? ... To be a complete thought you have to come to the end of yourself, you have to see your own birth and your own death, summed up. Maybe into a book."

In all this, even when she goes beyond mere violence and enters the realm of gore, Miss Oates is restrained, remote, writing with what seems a forced abjuration. Jesse is out to conquer death, and the motive is obvious: As a freak survivor of the family massacre, he feels his existence is but temporary and may be revoked at any time, that his only redemption is to save enough other lives. To her credit, Miss Oates writes as if she never made the connection between cause and effect, as if she were simply a reporter, not an interpreter. She's calm when she might have been shrill, and her coolness turns what might have been a feckless story into a powerful one.

A number of the major themes of literature are recognizable in Miss Oates's work. She has Tolstoy's sense of history as it overwhelms the individual, and she reveals a classical affinity for fatalism and lost innocence. Her characters are afflicted with the anomie explored by the French existentialists. On a lesser scale, she shares James Agee's reverence for the terror and frailty of childhood and, like D. H. Lawrence, she scorns the life of the mind as ineffectual and irrelevant.

But, most of all, Miss Oates's ties are to the twentieth-century school of American naturalism, particularly Theodore Dreiser. Although she is less concerned with sociology than he was, Miss Oates's stories unfold in the same harsh settings, and her characters fight to survive with the same befuddled amorality as those of *An American Tragedy*.

Of course, there is a difference: the Dreiser novel is a tragedy; *Wonderland* is not. Even when he's the hero of the operating room, Jesse never has enough hope to be a tragic figure. His story is mere catastrophe.

If it lacks tragedy, there is at least fatalism, always an indispensable ingredient of tragedy. Early in the book Jesse pleads, like a man praying for divine help "just this once," to be free of his fate. "If he had control of himself, Jesse Vogel, then nothing else mattered in the universe." All the while Jesse knows that he is never for a moment in control of himself.

ENTERING EPHEBUS

by Daphne Athas

Viking, 442 pp., \$7.95

Reviewed by Muriel Haynes

■ "Reading is what?" P. Q. asks his daughter Urie, who has just learned that reading Plato has jolted her friend Zebulon Walley's Baptist upbringing.

"The beginning of education," she answers.

"And education is what?" P. Q. asks.

"The end of superstition."

She laughs. Of course! Zebul is better off now that he has stopped believing in God. Unorthodoxy crackles in the air that blows through the cracks in the Bishops' dilapidated farm house "right in the middle of Niggertown." P.Q. is a philosophically minded Greek (he uses the literal translation of his patronymic, Episcopoulos); an iconoclast who scorns the work ethic. Now all that remains of the family's spacious life at Eastern Point on the Massachusetts coast is their store of books and Mrs. Bishop's grand piano anchored on an Oriental carpet. They are Depression refugees. The final dissipation of Mrs. Bishop's inheritance has pushed them into a small Southern town whose only link with the rational classic world is its name and its university.

From then on, it is Bishopry against Ephesus, poverty-stricken living and high thinking pushed a shade past credibility if you want to be captious, but never sentimentalized. Daphne Athas is much too gusty and anarchic to have any truck with false emotion.

She writes about growing up, the awesome strength and comic joy of innocence in provincial America of the Roosevelt years. Zebul, Urie, and her two sisters trail their clouds of glory in the now so-distant Forties, when blacks still came out of their shanties at night to strum guitars, and the United States, buoyed by the missionary idealism of the Second World War, saw itself as the hope of the world, its possibilities as grand as any Urie and Zebul felt stirring in themselves.

"We're going to crack this town wide open!" Urie shouts to the family, never doubting the triumph of Bishop wisdom over the Philistine enemy. Everyone is a free agent, P.Q. has taught his children. Though Mrs. Bishop frets with occasional maternal qualms, P.Q.'s message has gotten through to her, too. The least authoritarian of parents, he stuffs their minds, if not their stomachs, and turns his back.

Like the Bishop girls, the author is the child of a Greek father and an American mother, who left New England for North Carolina. To judge by her novel, we ought to encourage such unions, if only to have more of their untrammelled, tough-minded female offspring in our midst. Irene, the oldest, is the least adventurous. Her most assertive act is to shoot a rat that menaces the Shack, a pragmatic deed that shocks her sisters in its unimaginative practicality. It's the serio-comic episodes of the relationship between Urie, the brilliant, ambitious student, and the precocious Zebul that bring out Athas's astonishingly precise, knowing recall of adolescence, a word she would probably flinch at, for there isn't a shred of cant in her cosmos. These two become cult partners, like Attis and Sybil, gods in whom they see their own likenesses. Temperamental affinity bonds them together along with their sense of being outsiders—for Zebul comes from Haw, a squalid settlement on the wrong side of the tracks. They argue and scribble to each other as comrades and conspirators through high school and early college years, sworn to pursue truth, and ever more cocksure of what is "crap" and what isn't. Against the pallid Ephesus gentility, they launch the Cult of Ugliness, in defense of their own then unfashionable freakiness. They also steal a bit, with a certain excitement but without much guilt ("It was so easy").

Sex eventually hovers between them, but they keep it abstract, something to discuss and check out with the forbidden books. Their initiation is with others, and each is lucky. Urie decides she's in love with Bostwick, a naval officer, who repays her adoration with a gently temperate education. It's quite a different story with Zebul, who becomes the instrument for explorations

of sensual delight with Loco Poco, Urie's younger sister; she thinks their bodies make the same *vibrato* she coaxes out of her flute. Loco Poco is nature's child, as mysterious and insinuating as one of Gauguin's Tahitian girls.

Athas writes wholly from inside her characters and, even in her treatment of sex, there is never a discordant note of adult betrayal. Her perception is as true and direct as the impulses that stir her people. This is a wonderfully loving, pure-spirited book with an exuberant vision. Its secret, of style and attitude, is that the novel refuses to take itself too seriously. When a girl student solemnly talks to P.Q. about the "tragic universe," he pins her down. "Who sees the tragic universe?" She squirms and finally admits, "I do." "That proves my point: there is no tragic universe," he retorts. "There is only what you see." *Entering Ephesus* is built on this logic and, however we respond to it in 1971, while we're reading, it is irresistible. A mid-twentieth-century *Little Women*? You could say that. But without the piety, without the tears—or, as Zebul and Urie would say, without the crap.

NIGHTSPAWN

by John Banville

Norton, 224 pp., \$5.95

Reviewed by David W. McCullough

■ *Nightspawn*: night spawn: night's pawn: knight's pawn: an enigmatic title for an enigmatic novel. The setting is modern Greece in the year preceding the recent military coup. The author, John Banville, is a young Irishman who compensates for his decidedly bleak view of his fellow-men with a rich, even

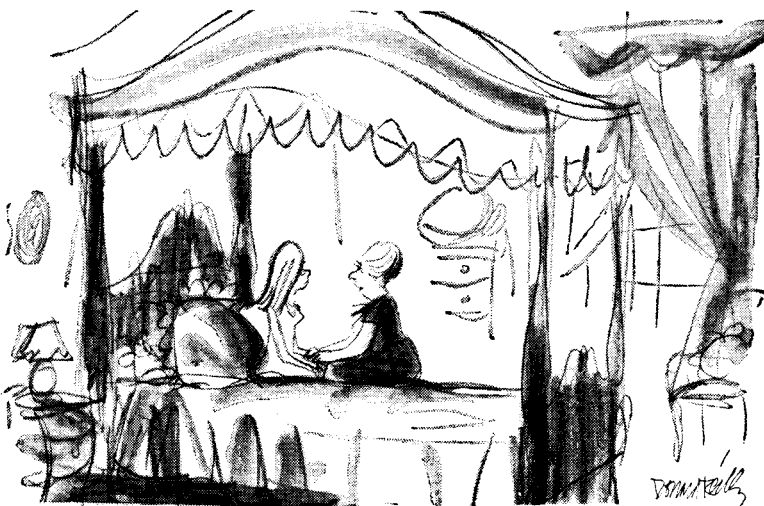
lavish, use of language. Puns, anagrams, and palindromes are used, and the author's references range from Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot to Kurt Weill and the rules of chess.

Benjamin White, Mr. Banville's world-weary narrator, is an Irish expatriate with one novel to his credit. He works, off and on, in an Athens bookstore and dabbles in revolution. His associates include an incestuous father and daughter, a pair of crippled homosexuals, and an aging colonel. White, who also uses the anagrammatic pseudonym James H. Twinbein, plots, lusts, and feels himself a failure. He never quite seems to understand what is happening to him or to think about the reasons why things are happening. They simply happen. There are no explanations.

So, what is the novel all about? Mr. Banville, characteristically, gives the answer obliquely: "I have a little riddle. Perceive. One word, three syllables. The first is a wager. The second is a fish. The third is one third less than everything, and the whole is my theme." The answer must be "betrayal," although Mr. Banville—again characteristically—doesn't quite play fair: the syllables are not divided "bet-ray-al," as his clues suggest, but "be-tray-al." That quibble aside, there is little doubt that the one trait just about all of Mr. Banville's characters have in common is that they betray each other, that no one's word is frankly worth anything at all.

Nightspawn is very much a young writer's book. It is full of tricks and literary sleight of hand, which often seem to be little more than ends in themselves. Still, for readers who enjoy fireworks displays, here is a dandy exhibition.

David W. McCullough is an editor with a book club.



"Your father is adamantly opposed to our sending your announcement to the 'Times,' but perhaps we can arrange for someone to leak it for us."