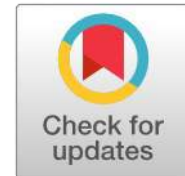


CHILDREN AS COMMODITIES IN THE AMERICAN SUBURBAN HOME: JOYCE CAROL OATES'S ADAPTATION OF THE RAMSEY CASE IN "MY SISTER, MY LOVE"

Barbara Miceli

University of Gdańsk, Gdańsk, Poland



Abstract

Joyce Carol Oates's *My Sister, My Love* is a fictional memoir inspired by the unsolved murder of JonBenét Ramsey. The novel, told from the perspective of the victim's brother, satirizes the exploitation of children in beauty pageants and the superficiality of suburban life. Through a counter-memory narrative, Oates sheds light on the hidden abuse endured by children, revealing the dark underbelly of a seemingly perfect family. The novel serves as a powerful critique of societal pressures and the devastating consequences for young victims.

Keywords: Joyce Carol Oates, children exploitation, Ramsey Case, American suburbs

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Barbara Miceli is Assistant Professor in American Studies at the University of Gdańsk, Poland. Her main research interest is the relationship between fact and fiction in contemporary American literature and TV.

E-mail: barbara.miceli@ug.edu.pl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5152-4347>

There is probably no worse and irredeemable form of child abuse than murder. That is perhaps what everyone who was exposed to the Ramsey case thought on the first days after December 26th, 1997. On that date, the body of six-year-old beauty pageant queen JonBenét Ramsey was found in the cellar of her home in Boulder, Colorado. She was wrapped in a blanket, her hands were tied, and her mouth was covered with adhesive tape. The subsequent autopsy revealed a fractured skull and vaginal lacerations. The local and inexperienced police was put in charge of the investigation, which for a long time focused on JonBenét's parents, the wealthy John and Patsy, who started a private investigation and defended their innocence on many TV interviews.

There are multiple theories on the case, the majority of which were made up by the media that invaded Boulder and devoted several cover-stories to the girl. The mother remained the main suspect for years, while another credited theory sees Burke, nine years old at the time, killing his sister and forcing his parents to stage a fake abduction to protect him.

What many commentators did not consider was that the murder might have been only the final act of a previous and continued pattern of abuse towards JonBenét. Indeed, some documents dating back to 1999 and unsealed in 2010 revealed that she had been mistreated by her parents long before her death. Anyhow, after all these years, the Ramsey case is still a cold one, with many theories and an entire Nation obsessed by a murder where "the victim was so young, blond, and beautiful, the parents rich and prominent and intelligent, the neighborhood fashionable and safe, the community secure and self-satisfied [...]" (Douglas & Olshaker, 2000, p. 269). The image of the girl performing on stage, dressed and made-up as an adult, has become a symbol and an icon not only of a young life that was broken in mysterious circumstances, but also of the exploitation of children and their innocence and beauty. As claimed by Mark Olshaker and John Douglas, "in a bizarre and perverse mockery of our cult of celebrity, in death, JonBenét became America's greatest cover girl" (p. 269).

In 2008, Joyce Carol Oates published *My Sister, My Love*, a novel inspired by the tragic event. When interviewed about the reasons that compelled her to write about it, she declared that "[her] primary motive in choosing this case [was] that it remain[ed] unsolved; also, it involve[d] the exploitation of a young child by her mother in a way that seem[ed] to [her] emblematic of such exploitation generally in our time" (Oates, 2008,

p.5). Writing about JonBenét allowed Oates to reflect upon the exploitation made by a mother, which was a generalized one and typical of the era and the specific place where the Ramsey family lived—a wealthy suburb. The author gave this story a universal and emblematic character, also counting on the young age of the victim. Many years before the publication of the book she had declared: “When you’re a young person you just don’t have any power, especially when a person in authority does something to you” (Johnson, 1998, 54). This vulnerability is what the writer wanted to stress in her novel, shedding light on a kind of abuse that is often underrated, hidden, or mistaken for excessive preoccupation for the future of one’s children. The aim of this article is to analyze the strategies deployed by Oates to adapt the Ramsey case in her novel and to compare them with the actual murder, along with the wider and more general habit of commodifying children in the context of the American suburbs.

Adapting the Case

Confronted about the evident similarities between the Ramsey case and *My Sister, My Love*, Oates admitted to having been inspired by it, but she also stated, in the introduction to the novel, that it was “a work of the imagination solely” which laid no claim “to representing actual persons, places, or historical events” (Oates, 2008, p. 3). The operation accomplished by the author is to disguise the facts, changing the names and the setting of the story, providing her idea of how things might have developed. The voice she uses is not the young victim’s (whose name in the novel is Bliss), nor her parents’. The memoir, which recounts the facts ten years later, is written by the murdered girl’s brother, Skyler.

The names of the main characters bear a certain resemblance with the original ones. The last name of the victim is indeed “Rampike”, which assonates with “Ramsey”, and her mother’s is “Betsey”, which bears some resemblance with “Patsy”. Her father’s name is Bruce, but everybody calls him Bix.

Oates revises also the main activity of the girl, because she does not compete in beauty contests, but she is a professional skater. Places and dates are also different from the original ones, as the fictional murder unravels in the night between January 28th and 29th, 1997 (and not between December 25th and 26th, 1996). The novel is not set in the town of Boulder, but in the suburb of Fair Hills, New Jersey.

The memoir that Skyler writes for the tenth anniversary of his sister's death states its aims from the very first page. The narrator defines it as "a 'unique personal document'—not a mere memoir but (maybe) a confession" (p. 4). The repetition of the events of ten years earlier aims at recounting the life of Bliss Rampike, remembering her, and trying to understand what really happened in the night she died. That is why Skyler explains immediately that he will not follow a linear and chronological path, but "a pathway of free association" (p. 4). The memoir lacks, indeed, a linear logic and the author's awareness of how it is going to end. Readers are equally unaware of the author and the motives of Bliss Rampike's murderer. As for the memoir genre, Oates's choice might be connected to the tragedy that inspired it. The horror elicited by JonBénet Ramsey's murder implies the necessity to create a narration that recounts her story as a victim, since memory constitutes, in the Ricoeurian view, "the ultimate ethical motivation for the history of victims" (Ricoeur, 1985, p. 187). The account has also the aim of understanding the reasons behind certain events that strike for their senselessness and cruelty, and only fiction "gives eyes to the horrified narrator" (p. 188). Rather than writing a traditional novel on the case, Oates decided to produce the parody of a memoir.

The memoir, which is "a factual account of the author's life" (Yagoda, 2009, p. 1), differs from the autobiography because it does not recount a whole life, but only a part of it related to some particular event (p. 1). Autobiographies focus on the author, while memoirs turn it into a character, "essentially negative, or at least neutral" (p. 2). The narrator in *My Sister, My Love* fits in this definition. Of his nineteen years he recounts only those he spent with his murdered sister and those following her death. Many chapters are narrated in the third person, as if the author wanted to be equaled to a neutral and sometimes negative character. Skyler is obsessed with the idea that he could be, although he does not remember it, the person who killed his sister out of envy. Since the girl had started her career as a skater, Skyler had been neglected, also due to a physical defect he had developed after a gym accident that had made him permanently lame. The trauma of Bliss's death, and the fear of being its author, add up to a set of mental disorders that make him a difficult teenager, always in therapy and forced to attend special schools.

Skyler is not a positive character, he has nothing exemplar, and perhaps for this reason he is the ideal author of a memoir. The genre spread in America in the 1960s, and at the time only "eminences, the pious, and people with exciting, unusual, or somehow

stirring stories” wrote memoirs (Yagoda, 2009, p. 67). From the Nineties onward, the object of memoirs were stories of “dysfunction, abuse, poverty, addiction, mental illness and/or bodily ruin” and “the more unsettling, shocking, or horrifying the truth, it sometimes seemed, the better” (p. 228). The story recounted in this novel features all these elements, except for poverty, since the Rampikes are the typical upper-middle class family living in a rich suburb. The dysfunctional element regards essentially the Rampike family dynamics, where children are used to attain popularity by their parents. The abuse is perpetrated by Betsey towards her daughter, forcing her to undergo an exhausting training, medical appointments involving the prescription of drugs, and most of all killing her childhood when she makes her up and dresses her like an adult. The dependency is that of Skyler, who was sedated since the morning the lifeless body of Bliss was discovered in the basement, and for many years afterwards, until he entered a clinic to start his rehab, and he quit taking drugs. The mental illness is Skyler’s, because he gets diagnosed with a new disorder every time he has a new psychiatrist, and he is considered at high risk of suicide. Finally, the bodily ruin is that of the boy, who must hide the fact that he limps, and after his sister’s death he loses all his red hair, to see it grow back in an unsettling zinc colour (Oates, 2008, p. 20).

The fake memoir written by Oates can also be associated to what Yagoda defines as “therapeutic culture”: a general tendency where “it’s not only acceptable but a good thing to lie on a couch in public, as it were, and disgorge personal stories [...]” (Yagoda, 2009, p. 238). Yet, even though the novel is filled with scenes involving a psychiatrist, paradoxically it is not one of them who gives Skyler the idea of writing a memoir as a cathartic act. It is a pastor, Bob, who exhorts the boy to tell his story: “Pastor Bob said: You must unburden your soul, son. You must tell your story. Told Pastor Bob hell I’m dyslexic. Or something” (Oates, 2008, p. 27). The man, whom Skyler meets during his rehab, becomes at the end of the novel the only reliable figure for the boy, and the only positive character in the novel. In this brief dialogue it is possible to notice how initially Pastor Bob is far from being the only trustworthy figure for the narrator. The dialogue is built on the contrast and the distance between Skyler and the pastor. The language used by Bob is solemn and it displays clear religious references, so that the pastor is defined later as “a religious lunatic” (p. 28). Skyler’s answer, on the contrary, contains an ironic shade, as he counterposes to the ethereal language of the pastor a much more concrete problem: his dyslexia. This is one of the elements that make *My Sister, My Love* a parody

of a real memoir. Even if it deals with quite serious subjects, it provides what Bakhtin defines as the essential element both of parody and satire: the comic double (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 58). The ironic element of the story does not regard the murder itself, which remains a tragic event, but everything that revolves around Skyler's parents. They are the real parodic element of the novel: Bix and Betsey, rich and ignorant, always engaged in the quest for a social validation with every possible means, including the exploitation of their children. The main target of Oates's satiric hatred is Betsey, an extremized version of Patsy Ramsey, who died of ovarian cancer in 2006. The author's satire does not have ethical boundaries, since she makes irony also of the death of the woman, an event that occupies the final part of the memoir and which determines the solution of the mystery related to Bliss's death. The press divulges the news that Betsey died of cancer of the cervix, but a conversation between Bix and Skyler on the day of her funeral reveals that she died for complications of a liposuction surgery (Oates, 2008, pp. 531-532). Betsey decided to undergo a liposuction because, after the death of Bliss, she had become a public figure, which had always been her greatest wish. The woman started to be hosted more and more on TV programs, wrote memoirs on how to overcome grief through faith and founded a brand, "Heaven Scent", which produced gadgets, make up for girls, and various objects inspired by Bliss, including a doll with her features.

Betsey's TV apparitions fit in the memoir logic. As claimed by Yagoda, "[i]n the publishing environment of the time, promotion was seen as the key to commercial success; the key to promotion was getting on talk shows; and the best way to get on a talk show was with a dramatic or unusual personal story" (2009, p. 238). Oates recreates the typical pietistic atmosphere of such programs, where Betsey can display several religious stereotypes and quotations that make her look exemplary and brave (Oates, 2008, p. 406). John and Patsy Ramsey's TV apparitions in various talk shows are the inspiration for Oates to write these pieces, because their words were always full of faith and innocence claims¹.

What characterizes this memoir even more than the satirical element is the voice of the author: a teenager. It is a voice that shapes the memoir because, among the genres

¹ See for instance the Hawaiian show *Connecting Point*, where the Ramseys were hosted in 2006. Questioned by pastor Wayne Cordeiro, Patsy obsessively spoke about religion and the strength she found in faith. In a section of the interview, she mentioned her son Burke, and Patsy claimed that "God ha[d] laid his arms on him".

produced by young people, biography and autobiography are the most significant ones, and through them, they can represent not only their selves, but also their frustrations and desires, like that of “knowledge in the face of knowledge denied” (Alexander & McMaster, 1976, pp. 152-154). Skyler tells his story because he does not know whether he has killed his sister or not. The event, as he remembers it, is filled with voids that do not allow him to reconstruct it following his memories, but only starting from what he has been told or what he has read in the tabloids. It is a knowledge denied for most of the novel, until a letter written by Betsey before her death allows him to acquire this knowledge.

Youth writing has some structural features that characterize it. Among these, there is the tendency to using the visual element, which turns out to be “the best and often only source of knowledge” (Alexander & McMaster, 2005, p. 53). Skyler’s memoir displays this inclination that manifests itself not only through the abundance of descriptive details (he describes meticulously the costumes worn by Bliss during her competitions), but also through the frustration of someone who cannot provide a visual form of what he writes (Oates, 2008, p. 231).

Another feature of youth writing is the appropriation of the voices of the characters, “so beginning a gradual fragmentation of narrative authority” (Alexander & McMaster, 2005, p. 156). The narrating voice in this novel never changes, but the point of view shifts between the nine-year-old Skyler and his nineteen-year-old counterpart. Yet the narrator absorbs the voices and reports them, sometimes, with the same confusion of the time he had perceived them first, constructing with them entire paragraphs without comments that narrate certain episodes on his behalf.

Oates chose the memoir to write about the Ramsey case because it is a genre that deals with memory, so it allowed her not only to give a very specific voice to the one who remembers the events, but also to exploit the proverbial fallibility of memory to produce a narration that is characterized by confusion and stratification. Memory is unreliable, since “consciously or unconsciously, we manipulate our memories to include or omit certain aspects” (Shields, 2010, p. 57), a manipulation accomplished also by the narrator when he admits that: “[...] you, who are Skyler’s readers, can know only what Skyler chooses to tell you. Though presumably I am the “author” - I, too, know only what Skyler can tell me” (Oates, 2008, p. 501). In this fragment, Skyler talks about himself in the third person (as in many other sections of the memoir) and he reveals all his unreliability as a

narrator, claiming that he is choosing exactly what to tell his readers. At the same time, he must rely on what the kid Skyler, and his memory, decide to tell him. It is a memory made even more unreliable after the years spent under the influence of medications. The scenes are reconstructed meticulously by the narrator who forces his memories and gives them a precise architecture that sometimes he must struggle to keep, revealing its artificial nature. It happens, for instance, in the paragraph "In the beginning", where Skyler reflects upon a conversation he had had with his mother when he was four years old, and she had vented about her marital frustrations. Skyler reports a great deal of their dialogue, and then observes: "Damn: I've forgotten to 'set the scene'" (p. 34). The comment, which is a metatextual note, reveals how the construction of the scenes is totally artificial and how memories can be manipulated and rearranged. For this reason, the memoir genre is not considered a reliable and objective account, but a genre "universally understood to offer subjective, impressionistic testimony. It doesn't pretend to offer the truth, just the author's truth" (Yagoda, 2009, p. 265).

The manipulation of memory is also the cornerstone of what George Lipsitz defines as "counter-memory": a way to remember or to forget that looks at the past to accomplish a revision of the existing stories, "supplying new perspectives about the past" (Lipsitz, 2001, p. 213). Skyler's perspective can be considered a counter-memory, a new version of the stories provided to him by his parents or the tabloids. A counter-memory, indeed, is not a refusal of history, "but a reconstruction of it" (Lipsitz, 2001, p. 277), what in fact Skyler does throughout the memoir hoping to understand whether he is his sister's murderer or not. The fundamental element of Lipsitz's counter-memory is that it seeks for hidden stories, those that were excluded from the dominant narratives. Skyler is naturally the neglected person in his family. Obscured by the beauty and the fame of Bliss, he is always excluded by his parents, and once his sister is dead, he is constantly sedated. Before the murder, he overhears his father confessing that he cannot leave his wife, even if he would like to, because she is obsessed with "our daughter" (Oates, 2008, p. 279). In the following two pages, Skyler writes only the titles of two paragraphs left completely blank. The title of the first is "...NOT A WORD OF OUR SON*". The asterisk leads to a footnote: "*Moment at which nine-year old Skyler Rampike realized irrevocably that in the lives of his parents whom he loved so desperately as in the vast world beyond the Rampike household Skyler Rampike was, at the most, but a footnote" (p. 280). In this textual metaphor, Skyler compares himself to a footnote, hence to a lesser element with

respect to the text—the dominating narrative mentioned by Lipsitz. All these stylistic and narrative choices lay the basis for a wider picture of abuse and neglect that goes way beyond the murder of Bliss. The next section of this essay will analyze the pattern of abuse recognized by Oates in the Ramsey case, and the commodification of children which appears to be a common feature of the American suburban home.

Children as commodities in the American Suburban Home

JonBénet Ramsey's murder was for Oates the ideal springboard to operate a criticism of some aspects of contemporary society, looking at them from the perspective of the Rampike family and the suburb of Fair Hills. She criticizes the golden life of the suburbs for its vulgarity, its exasperated consumerism, and for the effects it has on the institution of family. The author depicts not only their social class, but also how it produces a distorted vision of motherhood, which is dominated by ambition and the necessity of succeeding with every means possible, including the exploitation of children. These violated childhoods result in human beings unable to grow up, neurotic and affected by mental disorders and, as in the case of Bliss, precociously sexualized or raised to become miniature versions of their parents.

The people living in Oates's suburbs lead lives "of quiet vulgarity, punctuated only by demons descending from without or rising from psychological urges within" (Pickering, 1974, p. 220). One of the demons of Fair Hills is mentioned immediately by Skyler in the opening of his memoir: children have mental problems which are dealt with through medications (Oates, 2008, p. 8). Another demon is definitely the exasperated consumerism and the competition between households. This obsession is exemplified perfectly by the character of Betsey and her constant urge to possess things just to show the neighbours she is as good as they are. Her other preoccupation is that of becoming popular, so that she is ready to sacrifice everything, including her children. Skyler and Bliss become a commodity to enter the high society of Fair Hills: Skyler is forced to meet the children of the most affluent neighbours for playdates to which he reluctantly agrees, while Bliss is encouraged to pursue a career as a professional skater. The confusion between appearance and identity is not something that Betsey avoids, but the primary motive of her actions.

It is clear that behind the golden facades of many "ideal" suburban families lie serious conflicts, some caused by the anxiety for the future, or more precisely, as Cindi Katz puts it, "one's place in this future", which is a feature of many middle-class families (Katz, 2012, p. 173). Already in the 1940s, Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg recognized, among the coping mechanisms to tame this anxiety, the accumulation of objects and goods (Farnham & Lundberg, 1947, p. 111): a dynamic that seems to involve the Rampike family as well. Betsey, in particular, "agonizes" because she is forced to host parties in a house that is "so unoriginal Colonial", while her guests possess hundreds of acres on a private mountain (Oates, 2008, pp. 156-157). What Bix believes is that no one will really pay much attention to their house, as they are there to see Bliss, since she has been defined by the media as a skating prodigy (p. 157).

The material aspect of life dominates Betsey's relationships, including the one she has with her children. The obsession with them—with Bliss in particular—reveals the multifaceted nature of motherhood as Oates conceives it in this novel. Mothers are, in her narrative, "afraid of their children as they watch them grow into separate beings whose nature they can never understand or control" (Allen, 1976, p. 148): a feeling that Betsey experiences when Bliss starts wetting the bed and giving cryptical and disturbing answers during interviews.

Betsey's competitiveness, even with her own daughter, is a quality that, according to anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, contradicts the very idea of motherhood, as a mother is supposed to be "selfless and nurturing" (1999, p. 111), while competitiveness and ambition are quality that fit best in the professional world. For this reason, Bliss's career becomes Betsey's main job and preoccupation, turning her into her daughter's manager and ultimately change the family dynamics for the worse. Among the causes of dysfunctional families, Melanie Klein mentions the case where a child's individuality is not correspondent to what the parents wish it to be, and even more harmful is the parents' overambition and wish to gain reassurance "by means of the achievements of their children" (Klein, 1998, p. 321). Betsey is a textbook example of this attitude, as she lacks the nurturing features a mother should possess, and shows a devotion to her daughter that is uniquely dictated by the interest in her potential in terms of popularity. The narrator reports that the relationship between mother and daughter had been difficult right from the start, and only the prospect of a successful career as a professional

skater had made the girl “easier to love” (Oates, 2008, p. 90). The experience of maternal ambivalence, which is “shared variously by all mothers” and which involves the coexistence of “loving and hating feelings for their children” (Parker, 1979, p. 1), reaches in Betsey paradoxical levels, and it can be appreciated when Bliss is still a newborn in need of her mother’s care. Skyler remembers that his little sister was, in the mother’s eyes

[...] an exasperating baby demanding always to be fed [...], demanding always to have her diaper changed, needing to be bathed and again fed, nappy-nap time and diaper changed, bath, towel dry, new diaper, all babies do is sleep, pee and poop and shriek like a cat being killed and babies try to win your heart by cooing and “smiling” and reaching their astonishing little baby-fingers at you but babies are SO BORING unable even to say their names or walk upright or go potty in the bathroom using the flush (Oates, 2008, p. 36).

The piece stresses how Betsey finds the actions to perform on her newborn daughter mindless and repetitive. The usually tender aspects of babies, their smiles for instance, do not instil any maternal instinct in the woman, as she finds her daughter boring and dependent. Dependency in daughters, once they are grown up, takes on other connotations. From mothers they learn how to be women, because “they teach [them] consciously and unconsciously, what women are” (Arcana, 1979, p. 35). Bliss wants to be taught how to be pretty, and the result is an intensive training that—given the age of the girl—presents abusive shades: “Mummy had trained Bliss to open her cobalt-blue eyes wide and to smile in a certain way not to “grin”- not to “grimace”- but to smile shyly, prettily. Smile just enough to show her beautiful pearly teeth” (Oates, 2008, p. 18). Even though Betsey has taught everything to her daughter on how to be “pretty”, and she has made her a miniature version of herself, the relationship is still a competitive one. Because, “it is commonly assumed that mothers and daughters compete to see who is the most beautiful and sexually desirable” (Arcana, 1979, p. 102) and this competition is “initiated, or wholly carried on by [...] mothers” (p. 103). The weapon used by mothers in such situations is reminding daughters of their weaknesses (p. 105), which Betsey does with her daughter when she begs her to give her the permission to participate in skating competitions. Betsey’s reaction, when she has not yet realized the potential advantages of this activity, is to discourage the girl through harsh criticism of her bony face, and her small and strange eyes which stare people in a way that makes them uneasy (Oates, 2008, p. 88). The effect of Betsey’s demeanour with her children produces two ruined

childhoods, a product of the social environment where they live and of two parents unable to carry out their educational role. The relationship Betsey has with Skyler and Bliss is a narcissistic one: she is not able to "differentiate between herself and her children", rather she displays, as many other suburban mothers, "an odd combination of smothering overprotectiveness and lack of affect" (Zaretsky, 2007, p. 189). It is not only the relationship with the mother, especially in Skyler, that provokes the worst damages. The environment where the boy is raised, along with the mother's demeanour, undermines his mental sanity. But the problems of the main character are actually shared by all his peers living in Fair Hills. The lives of these children are filled with every material comfort, but they lack a real childhood, as Skyler recounts in the chapters "Adventures in Playdates" I and II. The narrator recalls these encounters imposed by his mother, afternoons spent at the houses of other children in the neighbourhood where playtime is actually not involved. The kids he hangs out with are little kings who live in beautiful houses, with rooms lavishly furnished, but they are lashed by mental disorders that some of them display as trophies or merits. One of them, Tyler McGreevy, instructs Skyler on the advantages of being the only child of two busy parents who make up for their absence with cash and toys (Oates, 2008, p. 112). Moreover, even if very young, Tyler understands that people bound to attend an Ivy League College cannot waste time playing. The anxiety for the future of these children starts quite soon, and Oates's criticism, which might seem an exaggeration, is confirmed by Katz who sees the tendency of parents to control their children's education through various expedients as another symptom of the already mentioned middle-class's anxiety for the future (Katz, 2012, p. 175). Betsey possesses the same anxiety towards her children, and that is why she sets up these meetings for Skyler, telling him that, thanks to them, "[...] [he] will make professional contacts for life" (Oates, 2008, p. 119).

The anxiety for the future stems, according to Katz, from the conception of children as investments and "commodities in themselves, absorbing and embodying the energies and ideas of their parents and others whose labors—affective and material—consciously and unconsciously—shape them as laboring subjects and social actors" (Katz, 2012, p. 175). This mechanism develops also with Bliss as soon as she reveals her skating talent. Betsey realizes that she can benefit, not only financially, from the ability of her daughter, so she tells her husband: "[t]rust me, Bix. Darling, have faith in me and trust me, our daughter is our destiny" (Oates, 2008, p. 139).

An excessive maternal control, which sociologist Sharon Hays defines as “intensive mothering” (as cited in Katz, 2012, p. 179), is one of the major causes of physical and psychological disorders in youth, often requiring pharmacological therapies (as cited in Katz, 2012, p. 181). In the chapter “Misadventures in ‘Mental Health’”, the narrator retrieves the long list of psychiatrists that took care of him after the death of his sister, and along with them, the list of the disorders he has been diagnosed with. These doctors conclude their visits with the prescription of a drug, but none of them can make the boy say what he really thinks about his childhood: “[...] for Skyler could not say yes it was my father, yes it was my mother. Could not say *They killed my sister, and they killed me*. He could not. He could not. He could not” (Oates, 2008, p. 420). Bix and Betsey destroy their children’s childhood, imposing on them an impossible ideal of perfection and trying to involve them in their will to reach a higher social status. The attainment of this ideal is linked to the narcissism of seeing the parents’ investment accomplished (Katz, 2012, p.182). The only sparkle of this perfection is present in Bliss, but the Rampikes also want it for Skyler due to his disability. Bix and Betsey try to minimize their child’s impairment, and they claim a physical perfection from him, as in the following examples:

“SKYLER, TRY NOT TO LIMP. YOU CAN WALK PERFECTLY NORMALLY, IF YOU make an effort. And please don’t twitch, and squirm, and make those ‘pain faces’- people will only be depressed, and want to avoid you” (Oates, 2008, p. 112).

“Son. This way. Out the back. And don’t fucking limp” (p. 522).

Betsey tells his son, when he is still very young, that his limping is something intentional, and that he would be perfectly able to walk normally if he wanted to. She exhorts him to suppress his twitching, his squirming, and his pain faces. All these gestures are inevitable for Skyler, because he cannot control them.

The obsession for Skyler’s leg is still present when he is a teenager. Bix utters the second sentence during Betsey’s funeral. Even in such a moment, the focus on appearance makes him say “don’t fucking limp”, as if Skyler could control it.

The same obsession for appearance and control is, of course, projected on Bliss, who is the embodiment of Oates’s criticism on children’s exploitation and commodification through beauty contests. Even if Bliss, differently from JonBenét, is a skater and not a beauty pageant queen, great attention is devoted to the way she looks

when competing. Indeed, Betsey dresses up her daughter as an adult in order to erase any childish aspect from her. The girl also gradually sheds any form of play time from her daily activities. In the chapter "Bad Girl I", Skyler illustrates his sister's routine, made entirely of exhausting training on the ice rink, classes with private teachers, and continuous therapies to cure a "phantom" pain she feels in her legs. The lack of play time subverts the characters of Bliss's childhood, since, according to Katz, it is a necessary activity for children to form their identity and their idea of the world (Katz, 2011, p. 56). Moreover, theirs should be "disposable time", "the greatest joy (and potential) of childhood" (p. 56). Bliss's time is shorn of this joy and potential, and she finds herself playing, only seldom, with a very old doll that Betsey tries numerous times to take from her. The girl talks to the doll with a voice that is "an eerie mimicry of [her mother's]", imitating her exhortations to work and pray harder to be "number one" (Oates, 2008, p.142). The girl's relationship with her doll is obviously not a playful one, and the object dates back to her early childhood, a time without competitions or training. The fact that Betsey tries to steal the doll from her several times shows the woman's will to erase that playful and careless aspect from her daughter, replacing it with more perfect objects: the dozens of more expensive and beautiful dolls she has turned her daughter into. The words of the girl are proof of how the woman has also shaped Bliss into a miniature copy of herself that uses not only an imitation of her voice but also the typical habits of her speech.

When Skyler asks his sister what is the name of the doll, her answer shows how the girl unconsciously considers that toy a surrogate of what she used to be before her mother decided to make her an athlete and to change her baptismal name, Edna Louise, in Bliss. The doll's name is, indeed, Edna Louise, Bliss's only trace of a past she was forced to give up.

Instead of the normal childhood of a six-year-old, Bliss—much as the figure that inspired her, JonBénet—finds herself living a life where she is displayed "as female merchandise" (Oates, 1999, p. 32). The children beauty contests, which in America are a big business, had become the focus of JonBénet's existence, as the skating competitions are of Bliss's. The way she is dressed and made up when competing reflects Oates's opinion on mothers who make up their daughters to make them look "luridly glamorous" (Oates, 2008, p. 103). The transformation of the girl is more and more dramatic. Betsey

dyes her hair, makes up her face, gets her teeth straightened, and dresses her as an adult, turning her, as it happened to JonBénet, into her mother's fantasy:

[...] Mummy has dressed Bliss as a doll-like replica of Betsey Rampike: both mother and daughter are wearing glamorous zebra-stripe dance dresses of crinkly, clingy velvet with provocatively tight bodices and flaring skirts, diamond-patterned black stockings and shiny black patent leather dance shoes adorned with red cloth roses (p. 162).

Betsey makes her daughter what she cannot be anymore, and she provokes, through the clothes and the make-up, a precocious sexualization of the girl, whose bodice is defined as "provocatively tight".

All these elements depict a pattern of abuse that might be partly fictional—with specific reference to the Ramsey Case—but which definitely applies to many American families whose children are only another asset in the struggle for success and popularity.

Conclusion

In a 2011 interview, Oates declared that the world of children beauty contests is "a very shocking world" where "most children are to some extent performing for their parents, wanting their parents to love them, to be so proud" (Foley, 2011). Parents, especially mothers, elicit in their children an atypical behaviour for their age, not differently from Bliss/JonBénet, who would never had "this strange child sexuality unless her mother had trained her" (Foley, 2011). The mother is apparently the one who can be blamed for the death of the girl, as in this fictional version of the Ramsey case readers find out that Betsey accidentally killed her daughter while staging a fake abduction to convince Bix to come back home after he had left. This is a confession that Betsey leaves in a letter to her son before she dies, clearing—in this way—Skyler from all the accusations that the press, and his consciousness, had made (Oates, 2008, pp. 535-542).

The narrative choice made by the author, that of solving at least the fictional cold case by revealing the identity of the murderer, can be seen as both a statement and a metaphor. By blaming Betsey for Bliss's death, Oates might have provided her version of the story of the Ramsey case, hence accusing Patsy Ramsey as many other commentators had done. But this choice can also be a metaphorical way to blame the woman for another crime: that of—perhaps accidentally, perhaps not—killing the innocence and the

childhood of JonBenét by dressing her up as an adult and teaching her moves and behaviours that were not adequate for a six-year-old. Her guilt is more generally that of commodifying her children, a sin that according to Oates—as other novels of hers show quite clearly²—is a generalized one in the suburbs. The writer's criticism of that kind of environment possesses characters that make it a universal one, hence a way to shed light on how child abuse can be located in unexpected places—those where children usually have everything—and take on unexpected and more surreptitious forms.

This recurrent theme in Oates's work is far from being "solved". Nonetheless, dealing with the theme of children abuse and neglect through true crime stories such as the Ramsey case undoubtedly turns out to be a way to bring them to the public's attention, lending them an authenticity that might help recognize the red flags behind a dysfunctional family, and perhaps preventing another tragic death as that of JonBenét.

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² A novel that is often compared to *My Sister, My Love* is *Expensive People* (1968) because it is set in the suburbs and it is inspired by another true crime story, albeit less famous than the Ramsey case, where a teenager kills his mother. The protagonist of the novel, who defines himself as a 'child-murderer', is also the author of a fake memoir where he recounts how and why he killed his mother Nada, another neglectful and complicated mother figure.

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Reviewers:

1. Anonymous
2. Anonymous

Handling Editor:

Stan Bogdanov, PhD
New Bulgarian University