

# Perfiction

by Joel MEGGS

## Beasts

by Joyce Carol Oates  
First Carroll & Graf

Joyce Carol Oates is of a rare breed of writers. Like Stephen King or Elmore Leonard, she churns out books at an amazing speed (in the past few years, at the rate of one a year), yet her writing is easily placeable in the category Jonathan Franzen would refer to as "High literary art."

She's also a writer that moves between short stories and full-length novels with relative ease, earning acclaim for both. Last year, her *We Were the Mulvaney's* was picked as an Oprah selection.

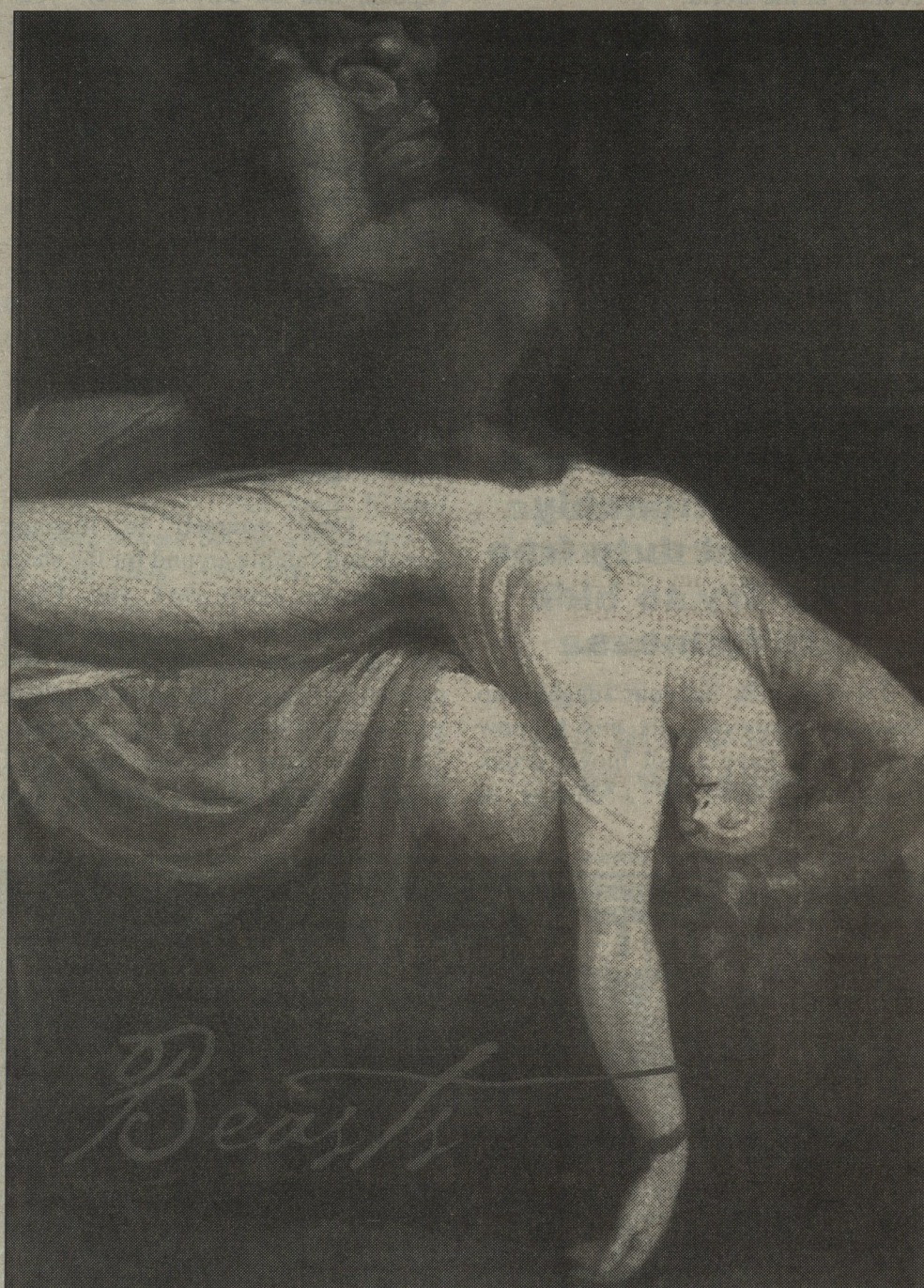
Refusing to rest on her laurels, Oates is back with one of the first offerings of 2002, *Beasts*. It is a novella of 138 pages, which tells the story of Gillian, a twenty-year-old college student at a Massachusetts university

during the seventies. She, along with many other girls at Catamount College, is in love with her poetry professor, Andre Harrow. Andre is married to Dorcas, a controversial local sculptor, who carves renderings of women that Gillian describes as "raw, crude, ugly. Most were of women and were defiantly sexual, with protuberant breasts and bellies, exaggerated pudenda." Underneath, Dorcas inscribes "WE ARE BEASTS AND THIS IS OUR CONSOLATION."

Before long, Gillian becomes involved with Andre and Dorcas. Officially she is their intern. Unofficially she is their plaything, having sex with Andre while Dorcas sketches their lovemaking. Some scenes from the book are eerily reminiscent of the Paul Bernardo case, especially when Gillian is drugged and exploited by the Harrows. She soon discovers that she is not the first girl from the university to become involved with the Harrows in this capacity, though this does not break her attraction to the couple.

*Beasts* reads like a mystery novel; the story begins and ends with a slate of fires and false alarms on campus, and Gillian and her friends speculating on who is behind them. As the poetry writing class reveals more and more about each of these girls (anorexia, drug abuse, sexual abuse, suicide attempts), we realize that any one of them could be the suspect.

It is difficult to figure out what Oates is saying about life on liberal campuses in the aftermath of the revolutionary sixties. Andre listens to the Grateful Dead and extols the virtues of D.H. Lawrence to his students, telling the girls, "Lawrence is the supreme poet of Eros. No recriminations, no reproaches, no guilt, no 'morality.' For what's 'morality' but a leash around the neck? A noose? What's 'morality' but what other people want you to do, for their own selfish, unstated purposes?" But as the novel progresses, we come to see Andre less and less as an ultra-liberal



professor and more and more as a sexual predator who justifies his actions with intellectual philosophy.

Similarly, the provocative Dorcas is seen at the beginning of the novel as a champion of freedom of art, defending her sexually provocative sculptures against those who decry it as obscene. But when Gillian discovers naked photos of herself and other students that the Harrows have sent in to pornography magazines mixed in with Dorcas sketches, the line between art and pornography is obliterated.

*Beasts* is about the vulnerabil-

ity of these girls that are living in the aftermath of the sixties. They see themselves as powerless, ugly, and unloved, which explains why they are so easily corrupted by the Harrows. Oates has a knack for transporting the reader completely to a time and place. The novella is awkward in that it could have been longer, giving the reader more background on the lives of Gillian's friends. As it is, we hardly know them except to know that each is troubled. But as it is, the book is a great read, easily devourable in one sitting.

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