

# DRAG: JOYCE CAROL OATES DOES MARILYN MONROE

*BLONDE*

Joyce Carol Oates

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I remember some of my father's paintings, as a small child in the late 60s and early 70s: bold chunks of paint hovering over brazen acrylic streaks, twisting into vaguely human shapes, vast expanses of color cracked by lightning streaks of bright orange, like scraps of a sunset. In reading Joyce Carol Oates's *Blonde*, my knowing that she, too, has been a painter helped me understand the grittiness and texture of her abstract-expressionistic rendering of the life of Norma Jeane Baker, the actor known as Marilyn Monroe.

*Blonde* already has been reviewed extensively. Interested to see what others, particularly laypeople (as opposed to "professional" reviewers), had to say, I perused the nearly 80 reader reviews on Amazon.com and found the reception of *Blonde* almost as interesting as the book itself. Most readers either loved the book or hated it. Of those who hated it, a few couldn't resist insinuating the *ad feminem* charge that Oates must be "jealous" or "envious" of Baker, otherwise why would she paint such a jagged, "obscene" portrait of her life? Blondes, after all, are supposed to have smooth, creamy lives. Of course a man would not be thus accused—and certainly not one sporting the unconventional striking beauty of Oates herself. But a man's genius at symbolic drag would perhaps not so easily be dismissed, either.

Drag—traditionally, when a man dons the

trappings of femininity for the entertainment of others—is *de facto* carnivalesque, even grotesque. The greater the diva, the more drag queens want to inhabit and imitate her. In so doing, the drag queen often out-divas the original, which is the source of drag's power. Thus, Oates dons the icon's life from the inside out, going where biographies do not, cannot, and must not. This has confused readers, who obviously don't know the difference between a Hollywood double (whose livelihood, like the biographer's, depends upon being taken literally), and drag, which depends for its entertainment value on audiences knowing what's underneath the dress. Unfortunately, much of this culture does not want to know the naked details of its icons' lives, factual or inspired. They prefer their illusions pure as peroxide—and too often as interesting. Instead, Oates unabashedly pirates a known life for its artistic treasures. As a musician might "cover" a hit, riffing on some of its musical themes, so Oates plays with the patterns and events of Norma Jeane Baker's life, creating a plausible series of vignettes, a smattering of what might have been.

Oates wildly illuminates the cost of beauty, the rice of public beauty, and perhaps most tragically, the limitations of being loved for one's beauty. As an author/drag queen, Oates "does" Monroe in a most skillful maquillage of words. Her prose has a choppy, unfinished feel, recapitulating the life she represents. In traversing Oates's terrain, the reader herself is jolted as the author imagines

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*Maybe Marilyn Monroe didn't think  
about cocks and dicks.*

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her subject to have been. Many voices crowd in. Trauma overwhelms and then recedes. Joy rains and dries up. Fairy-tale characters grow wizened and disfigured, then wax round and dewy again. Thus, Oates conveys a sense of her subject's quintessential evanescence. To the world, "Marilyn Monroe" was a bottle of champagne whose cork would be popped again and again, like her frothy bosom overflowing the bottle of her tight hourglass gowns. Norma Jeane, however, tasted of scratches and blood from pins that held her flesh fast—and had more nutritional value than champagne, as well. But her admirers wanted only the quick fix of her, and she of their idolatry, not a very sustainable combination, however symbiotic.

One interesting fact Oates flirts with is the possibility that Norma Jeane, whose father remains perpetually unidentified, was actually Jewish. Oates's Baker

fixes on stories of Jewish history and muses: "*In my soul I am Jewish. A wanderer seeking my true homeland*" (italics in original). If nothing else, from Norma Jeane's perspective, a tribe exiled, scapegoated, and annihilated, with no place to call home, comes the closest to looking like her own.

Oates also flirts minimally with post-zine culture, her boldest example being the handwritten word "whore" scrawled at the end of the chapter entitled "Divorce (Retake)." It gives the reader an instant of pause: Did someone vandalize the book? She also strategically places several bold, sans-serif vees (e.g. **V**), usually to denote the shape of a woman's crotch, that stand out among the rest of the book's small serif letters.

At the risk of autobiography, I confess that among my favorite parts was the fact that

two of Baker's male lovers were also lovers with each other. Though the two men would ultimately betray her, the three of them share an eroticism that cuts very deep, with one exception: Oates's lack of pornographic synonyms for sex organs renders certain passages slightly comical that might otherwise flow like sexual lava. Penises belong in textbooks; cocks, dicks, and even engorged rods in titillatia, even titillatia embedded in "serious"

literature. In fairness, perhaps Oates was reflecting the sexual naïveté her Baker purportedly embodied: maybe Marilyn Monroe didn't think about cocks and dicks.

But cocks and dicks certainly thought about, or at least reacted to, her—a fact that would propel Baker from one life situation to another, and ultimately to her own undoing. By having died young and stayed pretty, Marilyn

Monroe remains an ideal archetype for turning belly-up to examine the stark contrast of the underlying debris. Like any writer worth the paper she's printed on, Oates knows that what platinum patinas reflect and what they conceal is as inextricably linked as drag and the femininity it both mocks and reveals. Oates's interpretation of Norma Jeane Baker's rendition of Marilyn Monroe paints a beautifully nubby landscape of uneasy opposites. Together, these opposites compose this culture's collective myths: marriage and divorce, family and strangers, male and female, and, perhaps most tragically, love and its putative antonym, indifference.

Finally, what the mixed reviews on Amazon.com reveal, besides what we already knew about US culture (and anti-culture), is our tenuous relationship to Story: On the one



hand, we read/view/listen in order to suspend belief, to be transported, to forget. On the other hand, good stories do not float; they attach themselves to whatever is stickiest in our minds—they fill in gaps, create form from fuzz. Willingly or not, many readers of *Blonde* see Baker's life, not Oates's imagination, and react accordingly—visceral reactions don't always respect genre. Long after learning the word "abstract," I still saw "people" in my father's messy canvasses—and remember them to this day.

*Jill Nagle (www.jillnagle.com) most recently helped edit a volume entitled Male Lust: Pleasure, Power and Transformation (Haworth, 2000, www.mlust.com). She also edited Whores and Other Feminists (Routledge, 1997), and has been published in numerous periodicals and anthologies.*