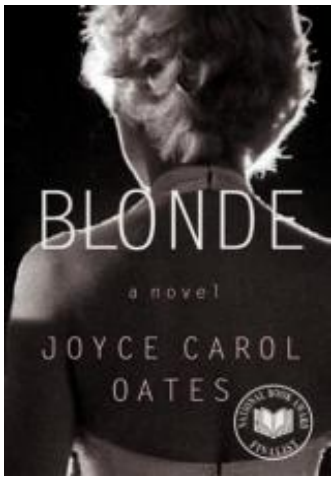
Blonde

by Joyce Carol Oates



About the Book

In her Author's Note, Joyce Carol Oates explains that **Blonde** is "a radically distilled 'life' in the form of fiction," not a biography of Norma Jean Baker, a.k.a. Marilyn Monroe. In fact, **Blonde** is perhaps Joyce Carol Oates' most ambitious novel.

Opening the book with Norma Jean's early years, Joyce Carol Oates draws a vivid portrait of a child's painful relationship with her mentally ill mother, Gladys, and her longing for a missing father. Oates also chillingly foreshadows, and at the same time makes comprehensible, the tragedy about to unfold. In one instance, star-struck Gladys, showing her young daughter the homes of Hollywood celebrities, comments about Valentino: "He had no talent for acting at all. He had no talent for life. But he was photogenic, and he died at the right time. Remember, Norma Jean -- die at the right time."

Then, Norma Jean, vulnerable and haunted by demons, grows into a wildly voluptuous woman. She succeeds as a pin-up, becomes Marilyn Monroe, gets her big break in Niagara, and begins her liaisons with the powerful men who desire and abuse her. Oates deftly reveals the fragile, gifted actress behind the icon. Yet while acknowledging the art of acting, Oates blasts the cold, destructive beast called Hollywood, and she draws scathing, unforgiving portraits of the famous men in Norma Jean's life, from the ex-athlete who beats her to the President who uses her and tosses her aside.

Monumental in its detail and scope, luminescent in its prose, **Blonde** examines the interior life of a woman, the culture that made her into an icon, and the forces that killed her. Related by a narrator on the brink of extinction, this multi-layered work sweeps the reader along on a tidal wave of emotion to an inevitable end . . . but an end where only Norma Jean dies. Marilyn Monroe and all her glittering movie personas live on.

Discussion Guide

1. "For always there was the Fair Princess. For always the Dark Prince," writes Joyce Carol Oates on the first page of the chapter entitled "The Kiss." Who is Norma Jean's Dark Prince? Her true love? Her father? Death? Do you think that romance fiction and movies have led women to hope for a prince to fulfill their dreams? If so, what might be the consequences of expecting that . . . and what were they for Norma Jean?

2. Joyce Carol Oates didn't give names to some characters, such as the Ex-Athlete and the Playwright. Why? Who are some of the other unnamed characters? Especially, who is the Sharpshooter? Do you think that his role in Marilyn's death is metaphorical . . . or is Joyce Carol Oates joining those who suggest that Marilyn Monroe was murdered?

3. Norma Jean as Marilyn Monroe has been called a mythic character -- or perhaps more accurately a cultural icon. What attributes made her a symbol? Are those qualities still idolized today?

4. Was Norma Jean promiscuous or a nymphomaniac, as some people charged? What would you say about her sexual experiences? Can you build a case that what she nearly always experienced was rape, not consensual sex?

5. Can you speculate why the author found this woman so compelling? What do you think makes Norma Jean/Marilyn Monroe such a fertile subject for fiction and nonfiction, film and print, even decades after her death?

Author Bio

Joyce Carol Oates is a recipient of a National Humanities Medal awarded by President Barack Obama, the National Book Critics Circle?s Ivan Sandrof Life Achievement Award, the National Book Award in Fiction, the Jerusalem Prize, the Prix Femina, the Cino Del Duca World Prize, and is a five-time finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. She has written some of the most enduring fiction of our time, including the bestsellers BLONDE and WE WERE THE MULVANEYS. She is the Roger S. Berlind ?52 Distinguished Professor of the Humanities Emerita at Princeton University and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2024, she won the Raymond Chandler Lifetime Achievement Award given to ?a master of the thriller and noir literary genre.?

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