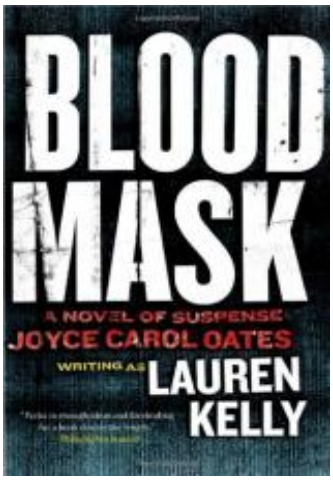
Blood Mask

Joyce Carol Oates, writing as Lauren Kelly



About the Book

A wealthy, charismatic, and controversial "benefactress of art," Drewe Hildebrand disappears from her estate on the Hudson River, seemingly abducted in the night. Her young niece, Marta, found in a desolate wooded area close by, is too traumatized to describe the abductors. A provocative exhibit of avant-garde "bio-art" that includes a blood mask of Drewe Hildebrand is disrupted by protestors.

In this, her third suspense novel, Lauren Kelly explores the startling world of "bio-artists" and their admirers, examining the intermingling of private, inscrutable motives with public masks of dominance and power; the ways in which spiritual yearnings may be transformed into worldly, erotic appetites that consume the innocent.

Discussion Guide

1. Annemarie's inner reality is represented at the opening of the novel in a fragmentary, "stream of consciousness" style, with almost no punctuation. Did you find this method effective? Did it help you to identify with her confusion and fear?

2. In what ways does Annemarie's relationship with her mother affect her later relationship with her Aunt Drew?

3. What psychological role might Tania Leenaum, the "girl who died" at Chateauguay Springs, play in Annemarie's mind?

4. Bio-art is real, and is very controversial. What kinds of questions does this novel raise about such a radical art form? Is it immoral, unethical, or just a new form of art that is disturbing, as new art often is?

5. Drew Hildebrande is no longer a practicing artist herself, although in a way, she has recreated herself as a work of art. Why do you think it was important for her to have Annemarie, recreated as Marta, come and live with her?

6. On page 49 Kelly writes, "Drew didn't believe in the old, tired tyranny of family life. At Chateauguay Springs there was newer kind of 'family' to which you didn't belong by blind biological chance." In what ways does this novel complicate traditional ideas about family?

7. The Warhol portrait of Drew seems to hold a lot of meaning for Annemarie. Drew describes Warhol as "an utterly empty man" (Page 75), and then goes on to say, "There can be greatness in such emptiness, I think." What does she mean by emptiness? In what way would it be "great?"

8. The reader gets a very different view of Drew through her behavior toward Virgil. What does this reveal about Drew's character, and what does Kelly's portrayal of their relationship have to say about gender relations?

9. Annemarie is unable to articulate her responses to the art that Drew shows her, but in her mind she asks the questions, "Isn't art meant to be beautiful? If art is uglier than life, why would anyone want to look at it? Why would anyone want to create it?" (Page 76) How would you respond to these questions?

10. Did you find the ending of this novel at all hopeful?

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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