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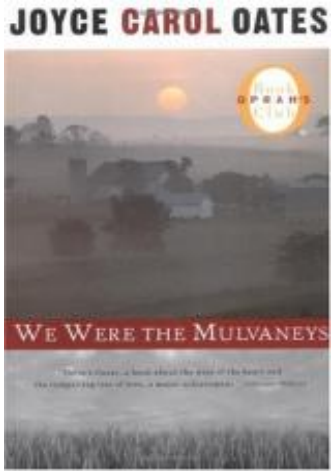
We Were the Mulvaneys

by Joyce Carol Oates



About the Book

In **We Were the Mulvaneys**, Joyce Carol Oates writes with piercing clarity and deep sympathy of the dissolution of the American family—and an American way of life. The Mulvaneys—parents Mike and Corinne, children Mikey Jr., Patrick, Marianne, and Judd—seemed to lead an almost charmed life on their rambling farm outside a small town in upstate New York (familiar Oates territory). Mike owned a successful roofing company; Corinne kept the semi-chaotic household bustling through the sheer force of her good humor (and devout Christianity); animals—horses, cats, dogs—thrived alongside the kids, although none was immune to the occasional scrape.

And then on Valentine's Day in 1976, a high school senior raped the Mulvaneys' beautiful, kind, sweet-natured daughter Marianne, and the bottom fell out of their world. Oates deftly, heartbreakingly traces the impact of the rape on each member of this family, exposing how swiftly and irrevocably good can be dragged down and corrupted into evil. The once-popular, respected Marianne becomes a kind of pariah, abandoned by her friends and pushed away by her parents. Her father, overwhelmed by grief and anger, lets the business slide, alienates former friends, and devotes himself to alcohol and law suits. Mikey Jr. distances himself from the family and from his former life by joining the Marines. Patrick, the family egg-head, at first retreats into his coldly rational fascination with Darwin and the theory of evolution, but once he's at Cornell becomes obsessed with a scheme to avenge Marianne. With Judd, the book's narrator, as his accomplice, Patrick stalks and abducts the boy who raped Marianne. The power of life and death is in Patrick's hands, and yet when the crucial moment comes, he refuses to act on his power. Patrick's act of mercy stands as an emotional and thematic turning point of the book, though the resolution is far from simple or painless.

As in previous works, Oates here covers many years and retraces the complicated, twisting paths that bring her characters to their present plight. But We Were the Mulvaneys departs from earlier works in the brilliance and vividness with which it evokes the tensions and pleasures of family life and family relationships. The Mulvaneys manage to be both "every family" and minutely realized individuals with their own quirky obsessions and personal tragedies. The book is also packed with the images and ideas of the decades it covers—the music, products, politics, social norms, and mores

of the late 1950s through the early 1990s. This large, sharply etched, immensely readable book is an examination of the American dream, and of the harsh but also beautiful realities that have transformed that dream over those past four decades.

We Were the Mulvaneys is at once a rich textured novel of family life and love (including the abiding love of animals) and a profound discourse on themes of free will, evolution, gender, class, spirituality, forgiveness, and the nature and purpose of guilt. A master of her craft, Oates weaves a seamless web in which ideas blend perfectly with plot.

Discussion Guide

1.After the rape, Marianne keeps repeating, "I am as much to blame as he is." Does the narrative back this assertion up in any way? How much does Oates actually reveal about what happened that night?

2.Both parents reject their daughter after the rape. Why? How are their reasons different? Are we meant to condemn both of them for their cruelty to Marianne? Or is their action somehow understandable and forgivable?

3.What role does the farm play in the life of this family? Is Oates making some larger point about the difficulties and tragedies of the family farm in American society?

4. Why is it Patrick—the scientist, the cold rationalist—who acts to "execute justice" on Marianne's rapist?

5. Animals are at the heart of the Mulvaney family—they not only love their cats, dogs, birds, and horses, they love each other and communicate with each other through their animals. Is this a family strength, or does it reveal something skewed in the family emotional dynamic? Have they in a sense glorified their animals by playing up their "cuddly" loving qualities and overlooking their darker instincts? Does their connection with the animals change after Marianne is raped?

6. Darwin and the theory of evolution are discussed at several points in the novel. What point is Oates trying to make with this? How does Darwinian evolution relate to the central incident of the book?

7. Marianne is a Christian and Patrick is a rationalist—yet theirs is a bond that remains most intact after the rape. Are their worldviews more closely related than either of them believes? Or does the rape and its consequences somehow reconcile them not only emotionally but intellectually and spiritually as well?

8. If Marianne's rape happened today instead of in the mid-1970s, would the impact on the family and on her life have been very different? What if the Mulvaney?s lived in a big city instead of in a small town—would the rape have a different "meaning"?

9. Does the novel's ending in a joyous family reunion come as a shock after so much misery and heartbreak? Is this meant to be a lasting redemption?

10. Does Oates encourage a traditional good-and-evil reading of her novel? Or does she lead us to reexamine these very categories?

Author Bio

Joyce Carol Oates is a recipient of the National Book Award and the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction. She has written some of the most enduring fiction of our time, including the national bestsellers WE WERE THE MULVANEYS and BLONDE (a finalist for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize), and the *New York Times* bestsellers THE FALLS (winner of the 2005 Prix Femina Etranger) and THE GRAVEDIGGER'S DAUGHTER. She is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University and has been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters since 1978. In 2003 she received the Common Wealth Award for Distinguished Service in Literature and *The Kenyon Review* Award for Literary Achievement, and in 2006 she received the *Chicago Tribune* Lifetime Achievement Award.

Critical Praise

"**We Were the Mulvaneys** works not simply because of its meticulous details and gestures.... What keeps us coming back to Oates Country is something stronger and spookier: her uncanny gift of making the page a window, with something on the other side that we'd swear was life itself. "

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