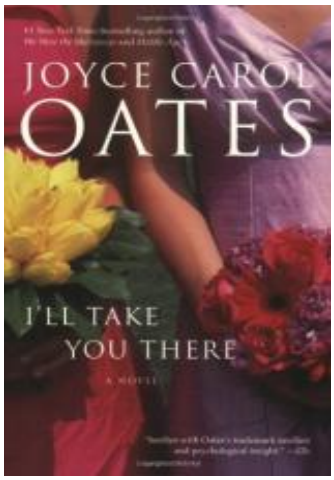
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

I'll Take You There

by Joyce Carol Oates



About the Book

I'll Take You There is told by a woman looking back on her first years of college, at Syracuse in the 1970s. Her story, softened by the gauze of memory and the relief of having survived, nonetheless captures a harrowing ordeal of alienation and despair, heightened by a wrenching interracial love affair and her father's death.

Cursed by insatiable yearning and constant dissatisfaction, "Anellia" has always been haunted by her mother. With her father and brothers making her feel responsible for her mother's death, she longs for acceptance and the warmth of human compassion. When Anellia begins college, she naively seeks that compassion at a sorority house, with disastrous results. Gradually she descends to deeper levels of estrangement, until she is nearly an outcast. She is swept up in a turbulent love affair with a black philosophy student only to be abandoned. Her sense of rejection reaches a turning point when she's called away to be with her dying father.

With deftly cast philosophical meditations -- on love, death, identity, the body -- **I'll Take You There** is a portrait of a young woman surprised to discover strength in simply enduring. It is a thought-provoking meditation on the existential questions that arise in burgeoning adulthood, a tender evocation of the dignity and power of young love.

Discussion Guide

1. The narrator never reveals her own name. What do we know for sure about this girl? What events in her childhood have left her emotionally conflicted? Is everything she says the truth? What does she lie about?

2. The first section of this novel evokes a Gothic romance: an old mansion, an aura of foreboding, a hidden secret in the housekeeper's room. How do the narrator's perceptions of her surroundings reflect her mental state? Is this kind of thinking typical of a teenage girl?

3. What is the narrator's fascination with Mrs. Thayer? Why does she trespass in the housekeeper's rooms? What does she find?

4. What attracts the narrator to Vernor Matheius? Do you think her brother Hendrick's words at the opening of Chapter Five -- "You! You are capable of any thing" -- are relevant to her choice of Vernor as the object of her desire? What attracts Vernor to her?

5. The narrator wants Vernor to love her. She says she loves him. Do you think that the narrator's feelings are love? If so, how would you describe this love? What happens to her relationship with Vernor?

6. The search for the missing father is a frequent theme in literature. Why? What has the absent father to do with our conception of ourselves? How has the narrator been affected by her relationship with her father? How does it change in the final section of the book?

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.?

I'll Take You There
by Joyce Carol Oates

Publication Date: September 1, 2003
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 304 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial
ISBN-10: 0060501189
ISBN-13: 9780060501181