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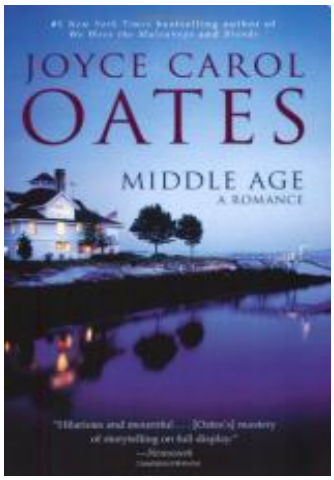
Middle Age: A Romance

by Joyce Carol Oates



About the Book

Calling this darkly comic novel "a romance," Joyce Carol Oates kills off her hero on the first page, brings his spirit back to comment on his own death, and makes his memory a catalyst to change the lives of his Lexus-driving, privileged, and morally mixed-up friends.

Everyone in Salthill-on-Hudson, New York, is middle-aged. Characterized by failed marriages, shallow lives, and liberal causes, the affluent residents enjoy the iconoclast in their midst: sculptor Adam Berendt who disdains their wealth (but secretly has millions) and seduces their women (but beds none of them).

When Adam dies in an act of heroism -- or foolish recklessness, his death at first shocks his friends then provokes grief, anger, and baffling questions. Who was Adam Berendt? Where did he come from? What secrets did his past hide?

Owner of the town's bookstore, red-haired Marina doesn't know what to do with the legacy he leaves her. Roger, his best friend and lawyer, commits a crime on his behalf. Other friends wreck their marriages, try to recapture their youth, rescue stray dogs, run away from home, or find true love. And all of them are transformed in unexpected and sometimes hilarious ways.

Death, identity, and deception form the themes of this exquisitely crafted, modern-day morality tale, and so do love and friendship. But it will take until the closing chapters for readers to find out if good deeds lead to salvation or disaster, and if all roads lead back to Salthill-on-Hudson. Above all, in **Middle Age: A Romance** Joyce Carol Oates cuts through the fabric of America's materialistic facade to expose the heart inside . . . and the soul of a man aptly named Adam.

Discussion Guide

1. Joyce Carol Oates gives readers some conundrums to puzzle out in this work. Why call the book **Middle Age: A Romance**

? Why name the town "Salthill-on-Hudson"? Why kill off the hero on the Fourth of July? Why name him Adam? Why name his dog Apollo? Have some fun trying to figure out what the author had in mind with any of these elements or others you find on your own.

2. In an interview with Greg Johnson, her biographer, Joyce Carol Oates said, "All my longer novels are political, but not obtrusively so, I hope." **Middle Age: A Romance** would be considered one of her longer novels. Do you think it's "political"?

3. One interview question that gets a prickly response from Joyce Carol Oates is: "Why is your writing so violent?" She calls the question "insulting" and "always sexist." However, even in this romance, she includes a healthy dollop of violent, one might even say grisly, events. What are they? What do they add to the story? Why are they necessary?

4. Exploring who we are -- our identity -- is a recurring theme in the writing of Joyce Carol Oates. Adam Berendt reinvents himself. Why? Is reinventing ourselves a choice we can all make? Would you, given the chance, change your name? Abandon your past? Live a different life? Why or why not?

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.?

Critical Praise

"Hilarious and mournful. [Oates?s] realism is laced with suspense, her mastery of storytelling on full display."

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