

JOYCE CAROL OATES (b. 1938)

Raised in upstate New York, Joyce Carol Oates earned degrees at Syracuse University and the University of Wisconsin. Both the range and volume of her writing are extensive. A writer of novels, plays, short stories, poetry, and literary criticism, she has published over eighty books. Oates has described the subject matter of her fiction as "real people in a real society," but her method of expression ranges from the realistic to the experimental. Her novels include *them* (1969), *Do with Me What You Will* (1973), *Childwold* (1976), *Bellefleur* (1980), *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982), *Maryna: A Life* (1986), *You Must Remember This* (1987), *Black Water* (1992), *I'll Take You There* (2003), *Missing Mom* (2005), and *Mudwoman* (2012). Among her collections of short stories are *Marriages and Infidelities* (1972), *Raven's Wing* (1986), *The Assassination* (1988), *Heat* (1991), *Hunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (1994), *Will You Always Love Me? and Other Stories* (1996), *The Collector of Hearts* (1998), *Small Avalanches and Other Stories* (2004), *High Lonesome: New and Selected Stories 1966-2006* (2006), *Dear Husband* (2009), and *The Corn Maiden and Other Stories* (2011). This story's style is a fascinating exercise in creating tension.



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Hi Howya Doin

2007

Good-looking husky guy six-foot-four in late twenties or early thirties, Caucasian male, as the initial police report will note, he's solid-built as a fire hydrant, carries himself like an athlete, or an ex-athlete just perceptibly thickening at the waist, otherwise in terrific condition like a bronze figure in motion, sinewy arms pumping as he runs, long muscled legs, chiseled-muscled calves, he's hurtling along the moist woodchip path at the western edge of the university arboretum at approximately six P.M., Thursday evening, and there comes, from the other direction, a woman jogger on the path, female in her late thirties, flushed face, downturned eyes, dark hair threaded with gray like cobwebs, an awkward runner, fleshy lips parted, holds her arms stiff at her sides, in a shrunken pull-over shirt with a faded tiger cat on its front, not-large but sizable breasts shaking as she runs, mimicked in the slight ~~shaking of her~~ cheeks, and her hips in carrot-colored sweatpants, this ~~Madeline Hersey~~ frowning at the woodchip path before her, Madeline's exasperating habit of starting at the ground when she runs, oblivious of the arboretum, though at this time in May it's dazzling with white dogwood, pink dogwood, vivid

yellow forsythia, Madeline is a lab technician at Squibb, lost in a labyrinth of her own tangled thoughts (career, lover, lover's "learning disabled" child), startled out of her reverie by the loud aggressive-friendly greeting *Hi! Howya doin!* Flung out at her like a playful slap on the buttocks as the tall husky jogger passes, Madeline with the most fleeting of glances, big-toothed bemused smile, and Madeline loses her stride, in a faltering voice *Fine — thank you* — but the other jogger is past, unhearing and now on the gravel path behind the university hospital, now on the grassy towpath beside the old canal, in the greenly lushness of University Dells Park where, in the late afternoon, into dusk joggers are running singly and in couples, in groups of three or more, track-team runners from the local high school, college students, white-haired older runners both male and female, to these the husky jogger in skin-tight mustard-yellow T-shirt, short navy-blue shorts showing his chiseled thigh muscles, size-twelve Nikes calls out *Hi! Howya doin* in a big bland booming voice, *Hi! Howya doin* and a flash of big horsy teeth, long pumping legs, pumping arms, it's his practice to come up close behind a solitary jogger, a woman maybe, a girl, or an older man, so many "older" men (forties, fifties, sixties, and beyond) in the university community, sometimes a younger guy who's sweated through his clothes, beginning to breathe through his mouth, size-twelve Nikes striking the earth like mallets, *Hi! Howya doin!* jolting Kyle Lindeman out of dreamy-sexy thoughts, jolting Michelle Rossley out of snarled anxious thoughts, there's Diane Hendricks, who'd been an athlete in high school now twenty pounds overweight, divorced, no kid, replaying in her head a quarrel she'd had with a woman friend, goddamn she's angry! goddamn she's not going to call Ginny back, this time! trying to calm her rush of thoughts like churning rolling water, trying to measure her breaths Zen-fashion, inhale, exhale, inhale and out of nowhere into this reverie a tall husky hurtling figure bears down upon her, toward her, veering into her line of vision, instinctively Diane bears to the right to give him plenty of room to pass her, hopes this is no one she knows from work, no one who knows her, trying not to look up at him, tall guy, husky, must weigh two-twenty, works out, has got to be an athlete, or ex-athlete, a pang of sexual excitement courses through her, or is it sexual dread even as *Hi! Howya doin!* tings out loud and bemused like an elbow in Diane's left breast as the stranger pounds past her, in his wake an odor of male sweat, acrid-briny male sweat and an impression of big glistening teeth bared in a brainless grin or is it a mock-grin, death's-head grin — thrown off stride, self-conscious and stumbling, Diane manages to stammer *Fine — I'm fine* as if the stranger brushing past her is interested in her, or in her well-being, in the slightest, what a fool Diane is! — yet another day, moist-bright morning in the university dells along the path beside the seed-stippled lagoon where amorous-combative male mallard ducks are pursuing female ducks with much squawking, flapping of wings, and splashing water, there comes the tall

husky jogger, Caucasian male six-foot-four, two-twenty pounds, no ID as the initial police report will note, on this occasion the jogger is wearing a skin-tight black Judas Priest T-shirt, very short white-nylon shorts revealing every surge, ripple, sheen of chiseled thigh muscles, emerging out of a shadowy pathway at the edge of the birch woods to approach Dr. Rausch of the university's geology department, older man, just slightly vain of being "fit," dark-tinted aviator glasses riding the bridge of his perspiring nose, Dr. Rausch panting as he runs, not running so fast as he'd like, rivulets of sweat like melting grease down his back, sides, sweating through his shirt, in baggy khaki shorts to the knee, Dr. Rausch grinding his jaws in thought (departmental budget cuts! his youngest daughter's wrecked marriage! his wife's biopsy next morning at seven A.M., he will drive her to the medical center and wait for her, return her home and yet somehow get to the tenure committee meeting he's chairing at eleven A.M.) when *Hi! Howya doin!* jolts Dr. Rausch as if the husky jogger in the black Judas Priest T-shirt has extended a playful size-twelve foot into Dr. Rausch's path to trip him, suddenly he's thrown off stride, poor old guy, hasn't always been sixty-four years old, sunken-chested, skinny white legs sprouting individual hairs like wires, hard little pot belly straining at the unbelted waistline of the khaki shorts, Dr. Rausch looks up squinting, is this someone he knows? should know? who knows him? across the vertiginous span of thirty years in the geology department Dr. Rausch has had so many students, but before he can see who this is, or make a panting effort to reply in the quick-casual way of youthful joggers, the husky jogger has passed by Dr. Rausch without a second glance, legs like pistons of muscle, shimmering sweat-film like a halo about his body, fair-brown, russet-brown hair in curls like wood shavings lifting halo-like from his large uplified head, big toothy smile, large broad nose made for deep breathing, enormous dark nostrils that look as if thumbs have been shoved into them, soon again this shimmering male figure appears on the far side of the dells, another afternoon on the Institute grounds, hard-pounding feet, muscled arms pumping, on this day a navy blue T-shirt faded from numerous launderings, another time the very short navy-blue shorts, as he runs he exudes a yeasty body odor, sighing a solitary male jogger ahead he quickens his pace to overtake him, guy in his early twenties, university student, no athlete, about five-eight, skinny guy, running with some effort, breathing through his mouth, and in his head a swirl of numerals, symbols, equations, quantum optics, quantum noise, into this reverie *Hi! Howya doin!* is like a firecracker tossed by a prankish kid, snappishly the younger jogger replies *I'm okay* as his face flushes, how like high school junior high kids pushing him around, in that instant he's remembering, almost now limping, lost the stride, now life seems pointless, you know it's pointless, you live, you die, look how his grandfather died, what's the point, there is none, as next day, next week, late Friday afternoon of the final week in May along the canal towpath past

Linden Road where there are fewer joggers looming up suddenly in your line of vision, approaching you, a tall husky male jogger running in the center of the path, instinctively you bear to the right, instinctively you turn your gaze downward, no eye contact on the towpath, you've been lost in thought, coils of thought like electric currents burning-hot, scalding-hot, the very pain, anguish, futility of your thoughts, for what is your soul but your thoughts, upright flame cupped between your hands silently pleading *Don't speak to me, respect my privacy please* even as the oncoming jogger continues to approach, in the center of the path inexorably, unstopably, curly hairs on his arms shimmering with a bronze-roseate glow, big teeth bared in a smile *Hi! Howya doin!* loud and bland and booming mock-friendly, and out of the pocket of your nylon jacket you fumble to remove the snub-nosed, twenty-two-caliber Smith & Wesson revolver you'd stolen from your stepfather's lodge in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, three years before, hateful of the old drunk asshole you'd waited for him to ask if you'd taken it, were you the one to take his gun that's unlicensed, and your stepfather never asked, and you never told, and you lift the toy-like gun in a hand trembling with excitement, with repudiation, with anticipation, aim at the face looming at you like a balloon-face up close and fire and the bullet leaps like magic from the toy-weapon with unexpected force and short-range accuracy and enters the face at the forehead directly above the big-nostrilled nose, in an instant the husky jogger in the mustard-yellow T-shirt drops to his knees on the path, already the mustard-yellow T-shirt is splashed with blood, on his belly now and brawny arms outspread, face flattened against the path fallen silent and limp as a cloth puppet when the puppeteer has lost interest and dropped the puppet, he's dead, *That's how I'm doin.*

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** How is the style of this story particularly suited to jogging?
2. What is the effect of the narrator mentioning the "initial police report" in the second line?
3. Explain how the male jogger is a character foil to Madeline Hersey. How do the other joggers' responses to him further define his character?
4. How might this story be regarded as a kind of sociology of jogging? Consider whether or not it seems like an accurate rendition of it to you.
5. How does Oates subtly convey the passage of time in the narrative? *clock*
6. The inevitable question: Is this story funny? Why or why not? *yes*
7. **CONNECT TO ANOTHER SELECTION.** Comment on the ways in which style is related to content in "Hi Howya Doin" and in Rick Moody's "Boys" (p. 238).