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By HADEN POLSENO-HENLEY Staff Writer

**"Joyce Carol Oates** is probably the most famous and certainly the most prolific writer of our time." I guarantee that this sentence was said at least once by every English professor at Vassar this past week attempting to Convince then students to go to the Annual Freshman Course Lecture.

Oates. a wiry woman with big red-framed glasses who jogs every day and claims to have SO much energy that it is nearly impossible for her to sit still for more than an hour, has written 35 novels and innumerable short stones. So I went, not only to hear a good novelist and a great shod Story writer, but to see exactly how much ass-kissing would occur between the introduction of Oates and the end of her lecture.

The first stop though, was the hour long "class session" held by Oates in Rockefeller Hall, Room 200, which, of course, was simply a chance for Vassar students to ask such relevant questions as whether or not Oates liked to eat breakfast before she went running and what effect this had on her writing, and if maybe she had any cliched advice about how to be a writer.

The fact that Rocky 200 was the room that was offered to Oates to hold this class session was only the first in a succession of Vassar embarrassments. The room, a pink, ugly cubicle with terrible acoustics, seemed better suited for a dentist's waiting room than a discussion with "the most prolific author of our time." The echoing walls of the room would prove to be a greater hardship though, when, amid questions like, "Ms. Oates, do you think that you will ever run out of things to write about?"(by the way. the answer was no) there came tumbling in the sound of bongo drums, all but drowning out the questions (hardly a terrible thing) and the answers. Trying to hide her frustration. Oates was heard to say that she would do all she could do to make sure that the "Bongo phenomenon" (or granola-sucking hippies in general) didn't catch on at Princeton, where she teaches creative writing.

In his introduction in the Villard room, Professor of English Frank Bergon could not help himself from mixing in a few boxing puns. This could hardly be avoided since it is well known that Oates is a big boxing fan, and has written a book and several essays on the subject. In fact, she was at one time friends with Mike Tyson (she is quick to point out that it was before his interests turned to rape and cannibalism). In the spring of 1996, she visited Vassar to be a part of a Boxing Symposium in which ex-champs Floyd Patterson and Jose Torres were the guests of honor. The Vassar professors managed to keep ass-kissing to a minimum. Strangely enough, the most glaring bit of ass-kissing that took place came from Oates herself. In an odd turn of events, Oates spent the afternoon in constant deference to Stephen King. She first corrected me

The professors managed to keep ass-kissing to a minimum, by saying that King, not she, was the most prolific writer, and she also spent much of her class session and her lecture talking about not only Stephen King's odd-ball writing style of working on two novels at a time, but what a beautiful person he was.

In spite of the distractions, Oates managed to say some inspiring and encouraging things, the most provoking of which was that everyone has different talents, even within the realm of writing. Her examples certainly instilled some confidence in me, such as the fact that Toni Morrison, also a Princeton professor, can't write short stories to save her life, while Eudora Welty has never been able to write a novel. And no matter what David Mamet sits down to write, it always ends up as a play. This conversation slowly digressed though, to talking about mystery and science fiction writers (where Stephen King's name was ever-so-noticeably raised again.) Though her lecture sometimes slipped into an absurd faux-inspirational speech ("Art is the highest expression of the human spirit"), as almost every talk of this nature does, Oates managed to make a good showing.

She was, above all things, humble, not willing to attempt to impress upon her listeners that the way to success was to imitate her. All of her answers to questions had the sentiment of "do whatever you want," and she seemed to have no grander lesson in mind. This I could appreciate, since I and most people I know here at Vassar, have neither the time nor the patience to be preached to.

The poems and monologues that she read were not inspiring, yet they were not disappointing. They were also short enough that she did not seem at all obsessed with herself, though she did say that she had brought much more material with her than she ended up reading. Some of this material came from her recent trip to Europe, which I only mention because she returned after a three-week stay having written or started 16 short stories. Beat that.

Probably the most entertaining part of the entire experience was Oates' final piece, which was prefaced by an equally funny story about a jailed man in Florida who had taken to writing letters to her. Saying that his heroes were Charles Manson and **Joyce Carol Oates,** the man explained that he wanted her to write his life story when he got out of jail, She once received a 17-page letter from him on a Wednesday and then received the same letter the next day, rewritten with only a few changes She had, of course, never responded to his letters anil eventually he stopped writing

She did write a very short story about this experience, though, in which the jailed man was a convicted child molester. The story itself was a monologue, in letter form, to Oates, denying his guilt and responding to fears that he may one day be free. Reading the monologue, the final words of Oates' lecture were, "Joyce Carol, I like my pussy with hair on it, and you're too old for mc."

Then, Vassar College's final embarrassments were two silly questions and a horrific fire alarm that cut short the Q&A.