

Heat by Joyce Carol Oates

My account of the sub-text:

What is sub-text?

Do we simply want to experience a story passively; do we want to be *told* what it's about, what it means? Or do we want to be authorised to interpret the story for ourselves and find its meaning for ourselves? Do we want to be given the opportunity to use our own imagination in the search for the meaning of the story? Or do we not want meaning but only facts – that it's enough to be told that the Whipple boy killed the Kunkel girls. Well, a straightforward newspaper article would give us that.

And that's not what Joyce Carol Oates has given us in *Heat*. Very few facts; very few details but rather an account of the event through the memory of someone who knew the girls; who once stripped off entirely because the girls asked her to to show their power over her. And then they stripped off too. Something we don't need to know to get the story of the murder of the girls.

Joyce Carol Oates' story is about the killing but because of the acausal structure she's used (at least acausal in terms of relating the facts of the story) it's about much more. And that "much more" is the subtext.

If I say *for me*, that's important – that's how creative writing should work: for me. If the suggestion is that the purpose of a story is simply to give you an account of something that happened then it will either leave you cold and unfulfilled or it will pretend a significance by presenting quasi facts masquerading as the truth. What creative writing does is to expose us to the truth which lies in the response the reader has to the text; a relationship found in the subtext. We are empowered in the subtext.

Heat, is not written as a factual account of something that happened but in the way what happened is remembered by the narrator and memory doesn't work like a conventionally focused, conventionally structured narrative. In one, overarching sense, the story is about the death of the girls but in a deeper sense it's about the narrator's relationship with the girls through her relationship with her memory. For me, the story is about the narrator. A significant passage is:

I never dream about actual things, only things I don't know. Places I've never seen. Sometimes the person I am isn't me. Who it is I don't know.

I think this passage directs us towards the subtext. That world in which death was coming for the girls; the girls the other children were jealous of; who made the narrator both scared and happy under the veranda. It's about how the extraordinary girls were secured in the memory of the narrator by their extraordinary death. It's about how lives are lived beyond the facts and beyond the silence that comes once the waves of the wake settle.

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