



JERUSALEM PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Joyce Carol Oates

News of this extraordinary award struck like lightning in my life. It came as a total surprise—an email message on a cell phone, intercepted in a wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in an exhibit of Chinese art in which historic art-works were paired with works by contemporary Chinese artists.

It is significant, to be informed of such an award, which is given for a lifetime of work, rather than for a single book, at an exhibit that celebrates the continuity of art over a vast period of (often turbulent) time; the dignity, relevance, and autonomy of art over the ephemera of politics and cultural change; the commemorative nature of art, that, regardless of its immediate subject, cannot avoid memorializing, in Yeats's words, “what is past, or passing, or to come.” Such an exhibit, like such an award, honors, perhaps unexpectedly, the impersonality of art, when it is perceived at a distance rather than up close, when personalities recede and larger, more mythic structures and themes emerge.

Among these prevailing themes are those celebrated by the Jerusalem prize: the “freedom of the individual in society.”

We understand instinctively that without freedom there is no art—indeed, there is no “individual.” Denying freedom of thought—freedom of choice—spiritual freedom—to any individual, is to deny his or her very being.

“Freedom,” however, is a very abstract term. Can there be “freedom” if there are dire economic circumstances in which (some) citizens & their children live? If there are not free public schools, for all children, for all students, can there be “freedom” in a society? When feminists are asked what “feminism” means, sometimes with an adversarial air, the answer is: “Full humanity and equality for both men and women—all men and all women.” Scientists, philosophers, and theologians have long debated over the paradoxes of free will and determinism. Obviously, we are “determined” to a degree by our genetic inheritances, as by our environments; the less we know, the less information we are given, the restraints of our lives politically, geographically, intellectually, will condemn us to *pre-determined lives*; by contrast, the more education we receive, the more books we read, the more teachers, professors, mentors; the more expansive and enlightened our societies, the more freedom of will we have. Our “freedom” expands exponentially as we acquire more information, more education, as we meet more people, a diversity of people; as we travel, learn new languages, explore new cultures—our “freedom of choice” ever expands, like our consciousness.

In a just society, such “freedom” is the communal goal—not just for the privileged few, but for all citizens.

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In Amos Oz’s *A Tale of Love and Darkness* the child Amos lovingly describes his father’s library:



The one thing we had plenty of was books. They were everywhere: from wall to laden wall, in the passage and in the kitchen and the entrance and on every windowsill. Thousands of books, in every corner of the apartment. I had the feeling that people might come and go, be born and die, but books went on forever. When I was little, my ambition was to grow up to be a book. Not a writer. People can be killed like ants... But not books: however systematically you try to destroy them, there is always a chance that a copy will survive and continue to enjoy a shelf life in some corner of an out-of-the-way library somewhere...

Oz's uncle, the scholarly Joseph Klausner, has an even private library in his home, more than twenty thousand volumes, including priceless manuscripts and first editions of "sacred and secular works, virtually the whole of Jewish literature and a good deal of world literature as well" shelved in bookshelves extending from the floor to the high ceiling and even over the doorways and windows of his house. These books exude an air of the "severe and the ascetic" while Oz's father's books exude an air of sensuousness: "Each book had its own private, provocative scent." One of the high points of Amos's childhood is being allowed to shelve his few books on a shelf in his father's library—"An initiation rite, a coming of age."

These are breathtaking passages. This reverence for books, this treasuring of the past, is not typical of American life in the 21st century, if indeed it ever was. Certainly such reverence for culture—such *awareness*



of a life apart from the material close-at-hand –was not typical of working-class American life, and rural life, into which I was born in 1938.

The great event of my childhood was Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and *Alice's Adventures Through the Looking-Glass*, in a single volume with the original illustrations by John Tenniel, a birthday gift from my grandmother when I was eight years old. Soon, I had memorized most of *Alice*. Unlike Amos Oz, who had wanted to “be” a book, I wanted to “be” the mysterious individual whose name was on the spine of the book—“Lewis Carroll.”

Over a period of years my grandmother gave me many other books, in addition to *Alice*, as well as an Olivetti portable typewriter, when I was fourteen; she paid for my weekly piano lessons, and for my music books. Among all of our relatives—in my father's and mother's combined families, quite a few persons—my grandmother was the only one who cared for books and (classical) music; the only one who had a library card, and who loved the public library. (As soon as I was old enough to qualify for a card my grandmother took me to the library to get a card for me: I recall walking with her, hand in hand, down the magical steps to the children's library on the ground floor of the Greek Revival building.) No one in my family had gone to school beyond eighth grade, including my grandmother; I would be the first to prevail beyond eighth grade, and to graduate from high school.

From the first my grandmother encouraged my writing, and my intention of becoming a teacher; she helped with university expenses; her response when I began to publish stories in literary magazines, and even to win awards, was invariably: “I knew you could do it.”



It would not be until after her death that we came to realize how little my grandmother spoke of herself, and how little we knew of her.

Only when a biographer began to research my family background was it revealed that Blanche Morgenstern was the daughter of a Jewish couple who'd emigrated from Germany in the 1890's, to upstate New York; to a small city called Lockport, on the Erie Barge Canal, in which there were no other Jews, no Jewish culture, indeed very little culture at all. (Fortunately, there was a public library!) It seems that the Morgensterns did not identify as Jewish; my grandmother never spoke of her origins, if she knew of them; great swaths of her life remained unnamed, unacknowledged. What an abyss, such silence! It fills me with sorrow, that I know so little of this person who figured so monumentally in my life; it's as if I struggle to open a door--and beyond is a wall, blank and unyielding.

We cannot know why anyone flees an identity—but we can guess that events so terrible, so unspeakable, in Europe, in the late 19th century, may have propelled my ancestors to seek refuge in a new world. It is understandable that traumatized persons might seek a sort of primitive tabula rasa in which not only Jewish history did not exist, but any history at all.

It is my grandmother's reverence for books and for literature, for the "life of the mind," that is my most profound inheritance, for this reverence has shaped me, as such instincts have shaped civilization itself. Not commerce, not politics, not science or engineering but art is the



highest expression of the human spirit, but this is not an expression that happens without effort, like weather; in the service of art, and civilization, there must be people like my grandmother, and those of you gathered in this room today, to *care*.

Being loved—within a family, especially--can carry with it a sort of blindness. We may (mis)perceive that we are objectively worthy of love, and fail to see how love is a gift we do not deserve. And it is the effort of others, who love, selflessly, many of them women, though not exclusively women, who efface themselves in the act of loving, and for whom sacrifice is but second nature. These are individuals not likely to be writers or intellectuals. Their names are not memorialized on the spines of books.

In my writing I have made a particular effort to express gratitude for such caretakers of civilization. I have given them names, and I have given them stories, and the respect that storytelling entails.

One of the great tragedies in life that we are so unevenly blessed. We do not all have grandmothers—or grandfathers—or parents—who will give us books on our birthdays, or pay for our piano lessons; we do not all have loving relatives who will give us typewriters, when no one within miles has anything like a typewriter; who will protect us from the cruelty of the world as Thomas Hobbes perceived it—a world “nasty, brutish, and short”—“before God was love” (D.H. Lawrence). The morally righteous society must take on these responsibilities, in protecting the vulnerable, the orphaned, the disenfranchised; social justice must protect those who cannot protect themselves; those who have no one to speak on their behalf. In literature, such an effort is the art of “bearing witness”— the central commitment of my writing.



The Jerusalem prize crystallizes these obligations for me even as it celebrates the enduring art of literature. To speak for those who cannot speak for themselves; those who have been silenced, out of poverty, fear, intimidation; those who have lost their birthrights, and perhaps their lives, through no fault of their own. Those who have been, in the lottery of our lives, losers and not winners—those who have not had *luck*. For it is solely *luck* that distinguishes us from one another: the luck of birthright. This obligation—and this celebration--is the essence of “bearing witness”: of all possibilities of art, the most urgent, in honoring, as the Jerusalem prize reminds us, the precious “freedom of the individual.”