

EDMUND WHITE AND JOYCE CAROL OATES

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South Court Auditorium

The Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers

New York Public Library

JEAN STROUSE: [Hotel de](#) Dream has received resounding praise on both sides of the Atlantic. The British *Guardian* called it “a marvelously compelling and moving story. Like the loves they describe, the sentences of the book are eccentric, disgracefully funny, and shockingly beautiful by turns.” Gary Shteyngart calls it “Astonishing. As honest, daring, and deeply felt as a work of the imagination can be.” Neither of the writers here tonight really needs introduction, but in case any of you slept through the late twentieth century, **(laughter)** Ed has written more than twenty books of fiction, including *A Boy’s Own Story*, *Genet: A Biography*, and *My Lives*. Among his many awards are the prize for literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a National Book Critics’ Circle Award. The French government named him an Officier de L’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, and I am pleased to say that he has recently agreed to become an honorary cochair of the New York Public Library’s new committee for its lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender collections, more simply known as the LGBT committee. Ed teaches writing at Princeton and is currently working on a brief life of Rimbaud.

He’ll be talking tonight with his distinguished colleague and friend Joyce Carol Oates, the Roger S. Berlind ’52 Professor of Humanities at Princeton. She has published works

of fiction, nonfiction, literary criticism, drama, and poetry on almost every interesting subject you can imagine. And her many awards include a National Book Award, the Rea award for the short story and the Prix Femina Etranger. Her fascinating latest book, *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates, 1873 to 19—18—* **(laughter)** I'm a nineteenth-century biographer and I do that *all* the time—I'm so sorry, Joyce, I apologize. *1973 to 1982*, edited by Greg Johnson, has just been published. You'll be able to purchase books by both authors just outside the doors as you leave the auditorium. Joyce and Ed have agreed to sign copies so please let them get out to the hallway after they speak, buy their books, and ask your follow-up questions there. You came to hear them, not me, and you're in for a tremendous evening. Thank you.

(applause)

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Well, it's certainly an honor and a pleasure to be having a conversation with Edmund White this evening. Usually we just gossip across the hall, because Ed's office is across from mine, but we'll just have to be more elevated. And it seems like a *really* friendly audience, because you laughed at something just a minute ago, so that's hopeful. **(laughter)** Well, I feel that I'm a fellow—of course, I'm Edmund's colleague at Princeton. I'm also a fellow writer, and something of a fellow masochist. The two of us complain a good deal on the telephone. Nobody else wants to hear us complain, but we understand each other perfectly, I think. Other people are quite exhausted by us. **(laughter)** But having read Edmund White's books more or less in sequence as they were published, I was not prepared for the dazzling richness of his work

in total, a remarkable variety of books ranging from the deeply moving, essentially tragic novels, which I'm sure most of you have read, *The Farewell Symphony* and *The Married Man*, to the airy sophisticated asides *en Francais* of *Our Paris* and *The Flaneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris*, from the early, widely acclaimed debut novel *A Boy's Own Story*, with its earnest, canny, and winning narrative voice to the ironic and elusive narrative voices of the Nabokovian fictions *Forgetting Elena*, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, and *Caracole*, from the deftly executed short stories of *Skinned Alive*—I love that title, *Skinned Alive* and *Chaos*, another great title, that rivet us with the urgency of their seemingly autobiographical dramas and tragicomedies, to the frankly autobiographical *My Lives*, which was published last year to immense acclaim. A critic in the UK said of this memoir, "It reaffirms White's well-deserved reputation as America's Marcel Proust," from the award-winning biography of Jean Genet to the collections *The Burning Library* and *Arts and Letters*, which are mainly on literary subjects, though *The Burning Library* includes a piece titled, "I'm Becoming a Model for Male Smut." **(laughter)** We're tempted to ask if Ed is still keeping up this career. That will come later, maybe. And *Arts and Letters* includes a profile of Catherine Deneuve originally written for *Vogue*.

I have not even mentioned yet Edmund White's most ambitious and imaginative historical novels, *Fanny: A Fiction*, which is the purported biography of a radical—nineteenth-century radical feminist, Frances Wright, written allegedly by her friend Frances Trollope and the novel we are gathered to celebrate this evening, *Hotel de Dream*, a slender but poetically compact and emotionally explosive novel about the last days of the young Stephen Crane, only twenty-eight when he died of tuberculosis in

1900, and the imagined manuscript, a novel, *The Painted Boy*, he wrote on his deathbed. Edmund, please tell our audience what led you to move into historical fiction, what surprises and revelations you've had writing historical fiction for the first time.

EDMUND WHITE: Well, I think I've always been a—thank you for that lovely introduction. I think I've always been a bookworm, and I love research, and when I worked on the Genet biography, I found it really totally involving. I remember going to England once when I was sort of halfway through the seven years I devoted to the Genet biography, and I was talking about Genet, and finally somebody in the audience said, “Well, you know, we actually came to hear about your own fictions,” and I had sort of forgotten that I even wrote fiction. I mean, I was so absorbed in this work on Genet. So in a way, I guess you could say that the two historical novels I've written now sort of tap on those same energies, but you're not held to the facts quite so much. I mean, it frees you to fill in things that nobody knows and to change chronology around a bit to make it more dramatic.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: I was wondering about that. I guess I thought that your historical novels were something very special that you went to directly, but I guess that biography, and then you've done other biographical works and little essays and things. Was the Genet biography pleasurable or was it difficult?

EDMUND WHITE: It was actually terribly difficult. Because I just sort of—my favorite editor, Bill Whitehead, who died soon after of AIDS, called me in '87, which was a year

after Genet had died, and said, “Do you know anybody who could write a biography of Jean Genet?” And I thought—I said, “Well, nobody’s already done it?” And he said, “No,” and I said, “Well, I could do it. Yeah, so, it will take me three years.” You know, well, I had never written a biography. And it’s sort of strange that we ask novelists to write biographies, because they’re not at all the same skills, and so when I was sort of two years into it, the editor—the new editor, because Bill had died—would call and say, “So, where are you?” And I’d say, “Oh, I’m about halfway done,” which was a total lie. **(laughter)** I hadn’t even started it. **(laughter)** I had no idea how to do it. I didn’t even know what city he was born in, **(laughter)** because he was the most *secretive* person who ever lived. And I just was *completely* overwhelmed by the project. I remember coming back—I was living in Paris all those years, and I came back to New York, and I stepped off the curb and I saw a bus hurtling toward me, and I thought, “If I just step in front of that, **(laughter)** I won’t have to write the Genet biography or try to pay all that money back.”

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Well, I think writers feel that way quite a bit, you know, especially when things are not going well. **(laughter)** When things are going really well, you’re afraid the bus is going to hit you, unbidden. But either way, the bus is going to hit you, it’s just not clear when. **(laughter)** There are biographers in the audience, and very distinguished biographers, and I just think that that is such an amazing genre. A number of biographers, I should make you all stand up. **(laughter)** It’s so—as you say, Ed, you’re held to the facts, which is sort of terrifying, and also can you be sued?

EDMUND WHITE: I didn't worry about that too much.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: He was dead.

EDMUND WHITE: He was dead, yeah. **(laughter)** I think in Mexico dead people can still sue you. Somebody was telling me that the families of the dead can sue if you've assaulted their family honor, but luckily, in our world, no.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: What led you to *Fanny*?

EDMUND WHITE: Well, I guess—When I was in twenties, I worked for Time/Life Books, and I was a researcher and eventually a writer, and we had—we were *very* underemployed. We had to *be* there all the time, but we had nothing to do, and it was this strange kind of Kafkalike existence, where you'd sit in this huge building on Fiftieth Street and Sixth Avenue all day long, never doing anything, and—

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Can I ask a quick question? Did you drink and smoke a lot?

EDMUND WHITE: Yes.

(laughter)

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Because some of us are watching *Mad Men*, there's this thing where they'd always be drinking and smoking.

EDMUND WHITE: *Time* was amazing that way, because *Time* magazine went to bed Saturday night, so to get everybody to stay there, they would pass the drinks cart, **(laughter)** starting around five o'clock, so you'd have free drinks.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: It's not like that at Princeton.

EDMUND WHITE: Yeah, right. **(laughter)** And one of my boyfriends was a copyboy, and he would say, "Well," he said, "the cover story I ended up writing myself, because all the writers were drunk and passed out." **(laughter)** And there was some big change so he would just do it. But anyway, while I was there, bored to death, I would read through the *Dictionary of American Biography* in many volumes, and one of the most interesting entries was on Frances Wright, who is the subject of *Fanny*, and she was this strange woman who was orphaned when she was two or three years old, and her family left her a lot of money. She was very beautiful. When she was quite young, she became the mistress of the elderly Lafayette. She came with him to America when he made his triumphant return forty years after the Revolution, and she insisted that he either marry her or adopt her, and he wouldn't do either, so she left him.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Why was she attracted to him if she was beautiful and had a lot of money?

EDMUND WHITE: Well, that's the wrong—

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Usually women do this for money or something, but—

EDMUND WHITE: She liked—

JOYCE CAROL OATES: She liked him.

EDMUND WHITE: She liked power. There *are* women who like that.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: I don't know any women who like power. **(laughter)** I should say that *Fanny: A Fiction* is just a wonderful novel. And it's dedicated to me.

(laughter) It's the best novel that's dedicated to me.

(laughter)

EDMUND WHITE: Well, I had a lot of fun writing it.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: There are some wild things in it, especially as the novel goes on, and it just gets more and more—kind of weird things going on.

EDMUND WHITE: Well, it ends with a séance, where Frances Wright, who's died, comes back and sort of beats up Frances Trollope, who's writing this very mendacious and insulting biography about her.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: That's great, that's wonderful. Anything else about that? Did you do the research in Princeton for that, also? I don't think it was here.

EDMUND WHITE: No, it wasn't. No, let me see. In England, at the British Library. My boyfriend, who is my memory, is sitting there. That's right. I had a year off, and I was at the, I'd get on the little train every day where from we lived and go in to the British Library, and that was a wonderful experience. I think in my next life, I want to be a librarian. I admire librarians, I think they have the most wonderful lives, and it's so interesting.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Strange things can happen back in the stacks. **(laughter)** I mean, we sort of think so, we don't really know. **(laughter)** But why did you—it's sort of a joint memoir in a way, a biography within a memoir. I mean, I was wondering why you paired these two women together, I think it was so brilliant.

EDMUND WHITE: Well, thank you. I guess I was always interested in—when I was very young, like twenty, twenty-one, I wrote a play about Rimbaud and Verlaine. And I thought, “These two, although they were lovers—they were probably the most famous male lovers of the nineteenth century, unless it was Oscar Wilde and Bosie, and similarly

ill-fated. They were very, very different from each other. Rimbaud was—had a steely will, could easily renounce something like *writing*, which he did at the age nineteen, never wrote another word after that, except in letters, whereas Verlaine was just the opposite. He was always getting drunk, and was a pushover and kind of nutty.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: He was older, wasn't he?

EDMUND WHITE: Ten years older, that's all. In my world, that's very little.

(laughter) So anyway, they—so I liked this idea of these two very contrasting personalities. And I think because of having worked on that play, and now I'm revisiting it, writing Rimbaud's biography.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: And you're writing about Verlaine as one of these Short Lives, I think.

EDMUND WHITE: Yeah, it's one of these short lives, but again, you know, I'm sort of very interested in the contrast between these two personalities. And so, with *Fanny*, I wanted to write about Trollope's mother, Mrs. Trollope, who was this sort of bouncy lady—much like my own mother—who was a real survivor, and not terribly consistent, and always sort of cheerful, and always getting into terrible jams and pulling herself up out of them, and then Frances Wright, who was a beauty and rich and uncompromising and very difficult person who ended up alone, so I was very interested in the idealist Frances Wright and the realist, the survivor, Frances Trollope.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: You use Frances Trollope's eye, very acerbic eye, to look at Midwestern America and the South. It's—Edmund is very, very funny and sort of devastatingly funny and witty, sort of using these prismatic voices, so to speak, and I think the female voice is somehow especially suited for the kind of little catty asides and looking at people and seeing things about people that maybe men—the average man wouldn't notice, so these women are used for that. And then of course in *Hotel de Dream*, the main narrator, or one of the narrators, is Cora, who's the wife of Stephen Crane. So you've told us about the Genet to some extent and *Fanny* and then how did you get interested in *Hotel de Dream*?

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EDMUND WHITE: Well, I think, I guess most people quite reasonably assume that I must be a huge Stephen Crane fan, but I'm not really, it was just that I read a biography of Crane and in it there was an anecdote that fascinated me, that Crane might have written the first forty pages of a novel about a gay male prostitute, because he—according to this friend of his, they had run into this boy. Crane had initially been repulsed by him, but then he had gotten intrigued, had interviewed him extensively, and begun to write this book, which was going to be a companion piece to *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. So I thought—well, eventually, according to this same witness, who was not terribly reliable, called Huneker, according to him, Crane was talked out of continuing with this book by a friend of his, another writer—

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Hamlin Garland.

EDMUND WHITE: Hamlin Garland, kind of a hairy-chested Wisconsin writer who had written a book called *Boy Life on the Plains*.

(laughter)

JOYCE CAROL OATES: And had sort of glinty eyes.

EDMUND WHITE: He said, “No, don’t, if you work on a book like this, you won’t have a career. You have to stop it.” I mean, never in a million years in my book do I even want to suggest that Crane himself was gay, but I do think he was a person of very wide sympathies, who actually was interested in, well, first of all, prostitutes. His own wife was a prostitute, and she ran a house of prostitution in Jacksonville, Florida, called Hotel de Dream, and he himself got into trouble with the New York police because he was always defending prostitutes. There was sort of a ban on him working in New York by the—because the police were so irritated by his interfering on behalf of women of the night, so that’s one reason why he became a war correspondent and eventually moved to England, because he couldn’t really work in New York. Anyway—So I just thought, if he had written this book, it would have been so amazing, because there was nothing about—nothing by a great writer about—in a realistic approach about—to gay life that I know of in the nineteenth century.

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JOYCE CAROL OATES: Isn’t there really?

EDMUND WHITE: Yeah. I mean, Proust in a way is the first person who really writes about cruising, intergenerational sex, male bordellos, all those good subjects. I mean, he covers everything. And that's—that's all before, during, and just after World War I.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: So Zola never did?

EDMUND WHITE: Zola never did. I mean, *Nana* makes love to a woman, his prostitute character.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: And Balzac?

EDMUND WHITE: Balzac did, and that's the great exception, because in *Les illusions perdues*, *Lost Illusions*, there's a character, who's a kind of master criminal who falls in love with Lucien de Rubempré, who's this sort of pretty, kind of dimwit from the provinces. And he sort of stage-manages this boy's career with ultimately disastrous results, but he is, obviously in love with him and sort of living through him. And that's a fascinating pairing and Oscar Wilde said, "the saddest moment in my life was the death of Lucien de Rubempré."

JOYCE CAROL OATES: And when you wrote what you call *The Painted Boy*, this was supposed to be—it was *Flowers of Asphalt*, *Asphalt Flowers*.

EDMUND WHITE: Well, according to Huneker, the original title of this book that Crane was going to work on was *Flowers of Asphalt*.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: *Flowers of Asphalt*, which is not a very wonderful title like *The Painted Boy*, which is much better. So did you reread *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and sort of think of it as a companion piece?

EDMUND WHITE: Well, I did look at *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, and I thought it was the most appalling book.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: It's awfully crude. I mean, your novel is so much better.

(laughter) Well, *The Painted Boy* is so much better than *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* that you probably couldn't write that crudely.

EDMUND WHITE: I just thought he wouldn't want to. I mean, it's just—I mean, you could see him actually learning how to write as he writes it, because the end of *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* is actually pretty good. And he sort of learns how to write one-sentence paragraphs, lots of dialogue, action, action, action, whereas the beginning is full of the most absurd descriptions and big ten-dollar words that are misapplied, and, I mean, you can see a very young writer learning how to write as he writes this first book.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: How old was he?

EDMUND WHITE: Twenty-two.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Twenty-two. Well, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* is set maybe right around, isn't it, or farther down?

EDMUND WHITE: Or downtown, a bit more.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: I don't know if you've read it but it has these wonderful descriptions. I mean, they are crude and exaggerated, of New York at that point.

EDMUND WHITE: Yeah, the bars and—

JOYCE CAROL OATES: A horrible place, muddy streets, and the way the—what they called truck drivers, I guess they had horses, but they were propelling these vehicles along and fire trucks and there were of course there were no intersections and no lights, and if you wanted to cross the streets, you'd have to run very quickly, otherwise these vehicles would bear upon you and run you over, and then I think they sort of intimidated one another too, kind of hurtling along, so the novel's filled with all this sort of street—street action, which is very lurid and hallucinatory. I think that you—*The Painted Boy* has some of that, it's really wonderful. You have—I mean, your sentences are much more refined, but I can sort of see it belongs to the same kind of New York City.

EDMUND WHITE: You know, I was very impressed by it, and also by his journalism. Because he worked as a journalist and his journalism has been collected, and he'll describe a fire, for instance, and what it's like when the fire trucks arrive, and so on. You know, as a journalist he's very good, or he'll talk about a desperate beggar, you know, stumbling around the city. And the other book, of course, that really influenced me was *Sister Carrie*, because I mean, that's the same period of 1890s, and again there's a lot of picture of desperation and desperate men in New York. But I mean it's important to remember that at that time, *half* of all the people in Manhattan lived in tenements, which meant eight people to a room, with no running water and no source of light or air. I mean, it was just—they were really appalling dens, which of course bred an awful lot of tuberculosis.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: I remember when you were researching this novel and working in the library here, you would come up and talk to me excitedly. And you probably should talk now about some of the some of the wonderful things and resources in this library, because one of the things about *The Painted Boy*, as I said, is a sense of a visceral reality. Were you looking at photographs and . . .

EDMUND WHITE: Well, one of the great things here and when you work at the library is that you can sort of—for instance, according to Huneker, they took this boy prostitute when they met him to the Everett House, so you just type in “the Everett House,” and up pops all these images of it on your screen which are in the library's collection, and the Everett House was a kind of posh hotel that was on Union Square. And then you type in

“menus” and you can find all the menus for your year, which is extraordinary, and you find out that this—that you know, like in my book it says that, I have the waiter saying, “The joint will be passed at five.” Well, it’s not marijuana, **(laughter)** it’s this big trolley of the beef and the ducks and the so on and you even know what kind of sauces they served with those things, all that’s here in the library, and then there was a wonderful woman working here as another fellow on the history of built New York and she came wandering into my office one day, and she said, “Aren’t you interested in the Everett House in the 1890s?” and I said, “yes,” and she said, “Well, here’s an entry from Edison’s diary, and he’s just visited it, and he’s very proud that they have a hundred-bulb chandelier,” so that immediately goes into my **(laughter)** . . . I mean it’s true that research oftentimes produces more interesting things.

Like, for instance, another example of this is this is that I thought—I sort of lying on my fainting couch one day, you know, which Flaubert called his *marinade*, and I was sort of on my marinade, and I was thinking, “oh, I know, I’ll write a scene where this older banker who falls in love with the painted boy wants to have a life-size statue made of him.” So then I thought to myself, “Well, who would be the sculptor?” So then I thought,

“Well, who did the lions in front of—and it was this guy called Attilio Piccirilli, so then I started researching Piccirilli here at the library, and it turned out that he and his four brothers all came over from Carrara in Italy, where their father had trained them to—how to polish marble, cut and polish marble. And it turns out that very few American sculptors actually knew how to work marble, so that people like French, French is who did the big sculpture of Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial, would have to send off a little

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maquette in plaster or clay to Europe, where people would render it into this immense statue, because nobody in America knew how to do that. And but so the Piccirillis thought, “oh, my, here’s a good market, so they came here in Morrisania in the Bronx they established a big atelier and they would render everybody’s—or fabricate everybody’s marble statues. So I thought, “Okay, but it would be awfully convenient if Piccirilli was a little bit gay for the purposes of my story.” Well then I started reading his—there’s an immense biography of him here in the holdings, and it turns out that he never married—well, he did get married very late in life but before that he lived with the Italian ambassador to America, who was always getting arrested on morals charges for running after various boys, and I thought “Wow,” (laughter) I thought, “I can use all this,” and so I just mention that because it’s just one thing leads to another and you sort of, I guess you half-find what you’re looking for, but you also are steered into other directions that you wouldn’t have suspected.

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JOYCE CAROL OATES: I remember when your wonderful memoir *My Lives* came out, I think it was just last year, just an extraordinary memoir, it’s one chapter after another, just brilliant, and it got wonderful reviews, and then Edmund said, at one point, “Well, I have enough material for another one,” you know, that you didn’t really have space to put all of your lives in. So I’m wondering with *Hotel de Dream* and the research that you did in this library, were there many exciting things that you had to leave out?

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EDMUND WHITE: Well, I mean, I write about—I mean the kind of frame story is Stephen Crane living in Sussex, in the south of England, where his neighbors are Henry

James, H. G. Wells, Conrad, and Ford Madox Ford, and of course, you know, I read so much material about all of that, including Miranda Seymour's wonderful book, *A Ring of Conspirators*, and I mean, such rich material, because all of those people knew each other and Nicholas Delbanco wrote a very good book about that world.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: He did, yeah.

EDMUND WHITE: So I don't know, I kept thinking, "Gee, this would—you could write a whole novel about that world," yeah.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Well, we haven't really talked even about the wonderful portraits of Henry James and Joseph Conrad and some others, but I have I picked this out, maybe you could read this, this is about Joseph Conrad, it's one of my favorite parts. Writers are always thrilled when fellow writers are held up to some sort of ridicule, I think, it's well, "maybe I'm not that strange if this person, if this great writer was so strange."

EDMUND WHITE: "Conrad came to visit him in the late afternoon. As it happened, Stevie had dictated to Cora, just before leaving Brede Place, a letter to Arnold Bennett, asking him to get Conrad a pension on the civil list. 'He is poor and a gentleman and proud.' Crane might have been describing himself. Crane added that he feared no one might ever like Conrad's books beyond a cult of other writers. Stevie was deeply embarrassed when he discovered that Lady Churchill was circulating a letter asking the

friends of Stephen Crane to contribute to an emergency fund for him. In any event, Lady Churchill was unable to raise any money for him.

Conrad was as small as Stevie, but he bristled with energy. His eyes were pinpoints of trouble, his mouth a flat line of pain, his shoulders so strong and high that he appeared to have no neck at all. He entered the room as if he'd just been asked to ascend a throne, and after an initial reluctance, now meant to show just how decisive he could be. The tips of his waxed black moustaches and spade-shaped black beard preceded him. His skin was sallow and the lines in his face spoke of long night watches on the ship of art.”

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Oh, well, you're not reading—there are other parts that are wonderful, too, about his pronunciation. I guess we have to move on. And the Henry James I guess is even better, and that's another thing, we all love Henry James and we all love to sort of see him ridiculed in different ways. **(laughter)** This novel, *Hotel de Dream*, has such a tragic ending. It's so heartrending that I can't tell you what it is, because there is some suspense involved, but it does involve Henry James, and I just wanted to read this little part here. Stephen Crane is dying and he's dictating *The Painted Boy* to his wife, Cora. And he's not going to make it, so he starts sort of fantasizing that maybe Henry James or Joseph Conrad could write it, could finish it for him. It's so touching—you invented all that, didn't you?

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EDMUND WHITE: Yeah.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: It's such a touching—it's so touching and kind of heartbreaking, the kind of fantasy that a writer would have, you know, that "I can't make it but maybe John Updike could finish this for me," (**laughter**) you know, it's such a complete fantasy. And then as Stephen Crane—Stevie is such a sympathetic character, I just loved him—Stevie says to Cora that Elliott, who's the painted boy, was in this fire, because the real painted boy, supposedly, was in a fire, and was all scarred. And I just love this, "Burned, Cora's saying, does Elliott die?" "Tell Henry James he can take some of those beautiful descriptions I wrote about fire in 'The Monster.' You remember, when I talked about the 'twisted glowing colors coiling like a serpent and dripping down onto the black man's face'? It's a bravura passage. I always like turning the horrid into something lovely." That is also so typical of a writer. If you don't want—if you don't have time to write something new, you can just sort of use something already written and then take it out, often. Then I also thought when I was reading this that it's a kind of commentary in a way on Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Were you thinking of that at all?

EDMUND WHITE: A little bit except I wanted it—I wanted the boy to have more of a presence than he does in *Death in Venice*. I mean, I always thought that that poor boy in *Death in Venice* kind of gets the short end of the stick. Because he's so, I mean he's such a kind of vaporous deity.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Tadzio?

EDMUND WHITE: Tazio, yeah. There was an interesting book that came out about three or four years ago about the real Tazio, who had a—well, I mean there was also the boy who was in the movie. The boy who was in the Italian movie based on Mann’s book became a drug addict and died very young, but the real Tazio grew up and became a Polish businessman and was totally indifferent to this great work that had been written about him.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: That’s not surprising. **(laughter)** But I just wanted to—I wanted to read sort of a contrast with Thomas Mann’s almost mystical or disembodied perception of Tazio, this is at the end of chapter 13 of *Hotel de Dream*, and suddenly Theodore, who was in love, he really ruins his life for this boy, and “suddenly Theodore realized how young Elliott was, and though youth might be a magical coronation that happens to people—everyone, but only for a moment—and to be with that person in the moment he was wearing the crown could be a privilege, nonetheless Elliott’s remarks reminded Theodore that youth is attended by silliness and immaturity and Theodore suddenly stumbled as if somebody had punched him in the stomach with the realization that he’d destroyed his wife and lost her all because of an infatuation with a kid incapable of understanding what was taking place in their lives and how much it mattered.”

Deleted: *Hotel du*

I just thought that was a wonderful rebuke to the whole romanticism of it, and yet he doesn’t cease to love Elliott, and then when Elliott is disfigured, he will love him anyway.

EDMUND WHITE: I think that—I think in retrospect, I didn't think of it at the time, but in retrospect, I thought that must have been influenced by *Lolita*, because there's that moment when Humbert Humbert comes back and sees Lolita, and she's now an aging beauty of nineteen, **(laughter)** but he loves her anyway.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: And she's so vulgar and she's chewing gum, but he loves her anyway. **(laughter)** Well, I just have one more question and then we'll open up to the audience, I'm sure you all have wonderful questions to ask. This is a question about revision. I'm reading a very interesting biography of Bernard Malamud by Philip Davis, who's at the University of Liverpool in England, I'm sure I've mentioned this to you. And I was so astonished and riveted by this biography and the process of writing and revising that Bernard Malamud was in the habit of observing. I guess he had a kind of ritualistic or talismanic way of writing that he probably couldn't write any other way. But just listen to this—many of us do a lot of revision. First he would write a longhand chapter, and then he would type it up, then he would revise that, you know, as we all do, then he would retype that, and make a clean copy. Then, for the next draft, he would do it all over again in hand. It's at that point where one draws in a breath. **(laughter)** It's at that point he's sort of leaving us, you know. There's a fluidity—I write in hand, too, but I don't do all this process—but there's a fluidity and fluency in your handwriting that somehow you don't find in the typing, I think. So then this is the draft that's handwritten. And then he would type that over, so there's another typed, and then that would be revised, and then that would be retyped by Mrs. Malamud, of course, **(laughter)** you have to have a wife who's waiting in the background, and so then this manuscript. Then I

suppose finally it was typed yet again by another—by a typist. So, isn't that very interesting? And his writing's wonderful.

EDMUND WHITE: There's a man longing for a computer.

(laughter)

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Well, I don't know. I think the retyping and rewriting. Because I do a lot of rewriting, retyping. Every time you write a sentence it changes a little, and you're adding things, so he would add things, and it's a little bit the way I write, actually, though not quite as laborious. But you have a sentence that's say twelve words long, and the next time you write it maybe it's twenty-four words long, and it has some commas in it, and suddenly in the middle of it there has arisen a strange metaphor or an unusual word that seems completely unconscious. I try to tell my students at Princeton to revise and revise because as you keep doing that each time some new things come in. So my question is just how, you know, how you write? I know you write by hand.

EDMUND WHITE: I write by hand, and there's an important step for me in revision which you haven't mentioned, which is reading out loud, and my poor boyfriend has to listen to every word I write. And because I love to read it out loud, because to me finally a book *is* a kind of performance piece, and you can hear a lot of clunkers, and then I have a very good secretary to whom I dictate things and there's this sort of—I dictate the

whole book to him—and there's this sort of wince factor that comes in. Because he's rather cynical, and has wonderful taste, and he'll say, "you're not seriously going to say that, are you?" **(laughter)** So that helps a lot.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: That helps? **(laughter)** Oh dear.

EDMUND WHITE: Well, he's kept me from a lot of foolishness.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Really?

EDMUND WHITE: Yeah.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Who is this person?

EDMUND WHITE: His name is Patrick Merla. He used to be the editor of *Christopher Street*. He's a very, very intelligent and wonderful friend of mine. I dedicated the book to him.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: That's very interesting, I think. There's just one more final question that has also to do with Bernard Malamud, since I've been reading about him. And his life seems so exemplary, he seems like an archetypal person who lived in his art. So, anyway, later in—late in his life, he only lived to be about seventy-one or seventy-two, he was not really very old when he died. He was walking up in New England with a

friend and he mentioned to his friend, “he regretted not having known the love of several beautiful women,” I guess he has specific women in mind, and his friend said to Bernard, “Well, that would have taken up a lot of his time, ‘which of your books would you have given up for these loves?’ Malamud thought for a moment and said, ‘None.’” So, I’m just going to ask you, is anything relevant here?

(laughter)

EDMUND WHITE: Well, I feel like being in love often inspires my writing.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Not giving up.

EDMUND WHITE: No, I mean, I wouldn’t. I mean, I guess I write so autobiographically, and it’s oftentimes about being unhappy in love and I remember when I broke up with a wonderful young writer and editor named Christopher Cox who died in the late ’80s or the early ’90s of AIDS, but when I broke up with him, he was a close friend and collaborator with the great composer Virgil Thomson, who was 95 or something, and he said to Virgil, “Oh, Edmund’s broken up with me, I’m so miserable.” And he said, “Well, he *has* to. That’s his stock in trade, that’s what he writes about.”

(laughter) And that was sort of a horrible realization, but I thought, “You know, it’s sort of true,” that all these turbulent unhappy love affairs, far from *keeping* me from writing, oftentimes inspire my writing.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Well, that's very true. If we can open it up for questions from the audience, we're really looking forward to hearing from you.

Q: Who gave you the best advice about writing while researching? Writing fiction while researching?

EDMUND WHITE: The best advice I had about writing while researching came from Joyce Carol Oates—

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Oh, really?

(laughter)

EDMUND WHITE: Because I said to her, I said to her, when I first started working on Fanny I said, "Should I do all the research and then do the writing?" She said, "No, do the research as you go along, because otherwise you'll forget it and anyway you'll never get around to the writing part." And that's true enough. I mean, if you do *all* the research first, you can spin that out for years, and meanwhile there's no book, and on the other hand, if you're researching *as* you're writing, you find, sort of magically, the things that you need and that get you going for another day and—and—and you remember.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Very good question.

(laughter)

Q: (inaudible)

EDMUND WHITE: The question is: Did I come to any deeper understanding of Stephen Crane after doing the book? Yeah, well, I think I didn't even have a very clear picture of him before, and now I think I have a very clear picture of him, he's certainly—well, yeah, he was a—Camus once said “American writers are the only writers who aren't also intellectuals.” And that's true, I mean. And he was sort of patented that. He was the guy who played baseball, almost became a professional baseball player. Never really read books all the way through. I mean, when he first met Conrad, he kept him up all night long, begging Conrad to explain to him what Balzac's *Human Comedy* was all about. But I mean he wasn't actually going to sit down and read it, **(laughter)** he just wanted to get the drift of it. And he was sort of a magpie in that way.

For instance, when he wrote *Red Badge of Courage*, he had read Tolstoy's fantastically detailed and pungent battle reports from Sebastopol and that had impressed him enormously and he was a big fan of Tolstoy, he thought that was the greatest writer who ever lived and he may have been right. But then he *also* read some magazine articles of Civil War veterans that were full of all those little particulars that writers love, so he sort of grabbed that, and took Tolstoy's method, and wrote *Red Badge of Courage*. I mean, I'm not saying that it was all that simple, but still there was something inspired there

when those two things rubbed against each other and I think he was—he *loved* being an American and when he lived in England. I mean, that's one of the funny things.

I remember once a punk boy with green hair in Manchester on television said to me, "Edmund White, you're known as a homosexual, as a writer, and as an American. When did you discover you're an American?" **(laughter)** And I said, "When I moved to Europe." **(laughter)** And I think that was sort of the same thing for Stephen Crane, because in England he would walk around with a six-shooter around his waist and brandish it and kind of alarm people like Henry James.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: He did?

EDMUND WHITE: Yes, he always had his six-shooter with him.

JOYCE CAROL OATES: Kind of like President Bush. **(laughter)** Stopped everything cold.

(laughter)

Q: I was just wondering, do you ever reach a point in your research where you know there's something you're looking for and you haven't found it, as if there's some little fact, or some date, or some something or other that's eluding you, and, if so, what do you do?

EDMUND WHITE: I think you just continue with the research until you find it. I mean, like, for instance, while I was working on my Genet biography, somebody interviewed me and they said, “Why did Genet, who wrote such intensely homosexual novels, after he finished those novels, he wrote three great full-length plays and there are no gay characters in them? Why not?” and I said, “Because he was embarrassed.” And then the next day—that night I went home and I thought, “Why’d I say that? I don’t know that. I never read that. That’s ridiculous. I’m just making that up.” So, I mean, this is before my book came out, so then I kept digging around, and I found in a Spanish magazine called *Trofeo*, an interview of Genet in which he said, “The reason I never put gay people on the stage is because I’m embarrassed.” And I was so relieved, you know, **(laughter)** that I felt like, “Well, that was one I triangulated properly.”

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But then I had a counterexample of that, where I was interviewing a man who had traveled with Genet when he was living in America and was a friend of the Black Panthers. And this guy was a kind of very macho reporter, and he said, “Well, I don’t want to talk to you about Genet. I was *so* deeply disappointed in him as a man. I revere him as an artist, but as a man he disappointed me.” I said, “why?” “I don’t want to talk about it.” Well, finally, after a lot of encouragement, he told me that the reason he didn’t like Genet is because when Genet was in his late sixties he danced in a pink peignoir for the Black Panthers. So I thought, “This is absurd, he *couldn’t* have done that. I know Genet, he never would have done that!” So then I just thought, “This guy’s nuts, and he’s lying.” Because you have to realize that people do oftentimes lie. I mean, when you’re

writing a biography, half the people who are going to give you this information are lying or they made stuff up or they heard it secondhand or they have a reason to think that, or whatever. Well, anyway, about three years went by in my research, and I was talking to Angela Davis, and she said, “Oh, I love Genet. He was the original gender bender. I remember that time he danced in the pink peignoir.” And I thought, “Okay,” you know. **(laughter)** So, I mean, you know, research is very complicated and I guess what you mostly need is Sitzfleisch. You need to wait, you know.

Q: Hello. Can you hear me? I was just going to ask, I was just thinking, as someone who’s written memoir and biography and fiction and historical fiction, I was wondering if you have any thoughts about—in terms of memory and imagination. I know Hemingway, there was a quote one time about Hemingway because he was criticized for writing about all his friends and how all everything he wrote and he’d ruined these people because he wrote about them and he said something like, you know, “You can never recreate history. It’s all fiction.” And I know I’ve struggled, and I just wondered if you have any thoughts about how you make the distinctions between—because I know a lot of your fiction is very autobiographical, and, so, just what you were just saying, too, about how people *lie* and how when we try to recreate something from our own memory, we’re filling it in and this whole thing with Oprah and James Frey and the whole, all *that*, I just wondered if you had any thoughts about that.

EDMUND WHITE: I actually don’t like it when people say, “Well, there is no truth, anyway, and everything’s a myth, and everybody is making stuff up.” I mean, I was very

impressed by a book by the philosopher Bernard Williams called *Truth and Truthfulness*, in which he kind of very sternly rejects that kind of relativism and says there *is* such a thing as truth. I mean, we know what day of the week this is, we know that we're in the library, we know that we'll be breaking up in a few more minutes. I mean, there are actual facts in life. There are other categories of experience, which are necessarily open to interpretation. And so in my own case, I guess I felt that when I wrote something called an autobiography, I'd try to be as truthful as possible, and I would call people up and try to check dates and facts and things. Whereas when I wrote my autobiographical novels, I felt like I had all the freedom in the world.

So that, for instance, in *A Boy's Own Story*, I was writing about a young gay man coming to terms with his sexuality in the 1950s in the Midwest. And I thought—I was actually a terribly brazen child and I'd had sex with five hundred people by the time I was sixteen, I thought, "if I write that down, it's a total freak case, you know, I mean, that will alienate all my readers." So I thought, "no, I'll make him this sweet, shy boy" and so on, because that will invite more identification, on the part of gay readers, at least, and I think it worked. I mean, a lot of people have come up to me and said, "Oh, your story is the same as mine." I thought, "Yeah, but, *my* story's not *mine*." **(laughter)** But in any event, I did present myself in all my garish colors in *My Lives*, my autobiography. So I don't know. I guess I make a distinction. It seems to me there's something generic about fiction, that in fiction you really do try to find characters who are somehow representative of a time or of a moment in history, and people review it that way, too. I mean, people say, "White obviously embraces the Freudian theory of homosexuality, because he has in this book an

oppressive mother and an absent father.” Well, that never entered my mind. But that is the way people review, and it’s the way people read fiction, because fiction is supposed to somehow be representative or generic, whereas in an autobiography you let a person be just as eccentric as they really are.

(Applause)