On Joyce Carol Oates’ *Wild Nights! Stories about the Last Days of Poe, Dickinson, Twain, James, and Hemingway* and Christopher Benfey’s *A Summer of the Hummingbirds: Love, Art, and Scandal in the Intersecting Worlds of Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, & Martin Johnson Heade*

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In *Wild Nights!*, titled after the famous Emily Dickinson poem, Joyce Carol Oates gives us fictionalized versions of the ends of the lives of a number of famous American authors. Three of the stories—those based on Mark Twain, Henry James, and Ernest Hemingway—dramatize key events leading up to death. Two others, about Poe and Dickinson, describe writers in the afterlife. Taken as fiction based loosely on real life, Oates’s volume is vivid and powerful—sometimes funny, sometimes shattering in its emotional impact.

All the writers Oates chooses are skeptics (a few are avowed atheists) who face death without the comfort of religious certainty. This gives Oates’ book a brooding, existential edge. Around the time of death, these authors are well beyond their artistic peaks and are struggling with physical or mental illness.

The lead-off story begins with Poe’s death and follows him into an imagined afterlife that seems at first wildly improbable but makes poignant sense as the story progresses. Having expired after a drunken binge on the streets of Baltimore, Poe finds himself as a lighthouse keeper two hundred miles off the coast of Chile. Stranded in the ocean, completely cut off from human contact, Poe keeps a diary of the mundane tasks involved in lighthouse-keeping. Poe rides waves of emotion, from initial exhilaration at being free of his literary enemies through depression over his solitariness to ultimate ecstasy when he experiences new-found love (crazily, he falls for a one-eyed amphibious mammal that creeps onto his island).

Poe as a lighthouse keeper? Not exactly the purgatory—or hell—one would think of for an author who specialized in claustrophobic interiors, live burial, and perverse murderers. But as we follow Oates’s inventive narrative, the lighthouse and its bleak setting become more and more suggestive.
After all, Poe was, figuratively, a kind of lighthouse-keeper, a faithful attendant of the beacon of art, which he kept alive while many of his contemporaries produced meandering, artless fiction, often using his favorite themes but sacrificing them to crass sensationalism. He illuminated the future, as proven by his enduring influence on writers from the French symbolists through the New Critics to modern writers. The infatuation of Oates's Poe with a marine cyclops is at first jarring but fits into the poet's own imagining of living alone in a “kingdom by the sea” with a fantasized Annabel Lee who is a product of his hyperactive fancy.

Oates's other life-after-death sketch, “EDickinsonRepiLuxe,” imagines the reclusive Amherst poet returning to life as an automated, life-sized doll, purchased for entertainment and edification by an American middle-class couple. While shopping for a RepiLuxe, the husband and wife consider many available celebrities, from Mozart through Babe Ruth, but choose Emily Dickinson for her literary skills. The wife, especially, is thrilled at the prospect of having a world-class poet in the house. She grows even more excited when she takes her creative robot home and watches her drift noiselessly about in her white dress, scribbling verse on paper scraps that she tucks away. Eventually, the wife imitates Emily by penning cryptic lines of her own. The husband, in contrast, hates poetry and comes to resent the poet-doll, even as he lusts after her. In a one-of-a-kind rape scene, he enters the poet's room one night and assaults her sexually, only to find to his horror that, as a RepliLuxe, she has no pubic hair or genitalia.

The tale becomes a parable of women's liberation cum lesbianism, in the vein of Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*. Appalled by her husband's attempted rape of the RepiLuxe and disillusioned by bourgeois domesticity, the wife one day leaves her house for good, accompanied by her Dickinson doll. We learn no more about the women, but we can imagine them escaping into poetry and loving intimacy, free of the male oppression that had nearly crushed them.

These life-after-death stories in *Wild Nights!* are less problematic than the approach-to-death ones, since it is impossible to take them as factual. There is safety in the fictionality of Oates's following Poe and Dickinson into the afterlife. As we read, we tell ourselves, this is not happening, this never did happen. It may be meaningful, but it is not true.

The same cannot be said of the approach-to-death stories, in which Oates builds on real facts. It is well known that Samuel Clemens in his final years surrounded himself with adoring prepubescent girls he called Angelfish; that Henry James toward the end worked as a volunteer nurse among English and Belgium soldiers at London's St. Bartholomew's Hospital; and that Hemingway, wracked by illness and depression, killed himself with a shotgun in Ketchum, Idaho in 1961.

That Oates turns all of these facts into compelling fiction is seductive but risky. It is hard not be spellbound by the near-death dramas Oates invents. In her treatment, the aged Clemens becomes a kind of jaded Humbert Humbert, obsessed by nymphets and ever ready to manipulate them for his own purposes. Henry James, for his part, is not the self-assured Master of his major phase but rather a neurotic homosexual who grovels at the feet of wounded boy-soldiers at St. Bart's. Hemingway's suicide becomes an orgy of sensual and metaphysical delight.
Haunting and provocative. But true? There's the rub. One can imagine many readers perusing the volume and thinking, “Wow! I didn't know Mark Twain was such a malicious old pervert!” or “I always suspected Henry James was gay, but I didn't know that he actually came out of the closet in old age and was a sadomasochist to boot!”

Oates takes great liberty with facts. She tries to deflect criticism by prefacing her volume with a disclaimer: “Wild Nights is a work of fiction. The characterizations and incidents presented are totally the product of the author's imagination and have no basis in the real lives of the author depicted.”

Actually, though, much of the book is based on the real lives of its subjects. Take Oates's story “Grandpa Clemens & Angelfish.” The real Clemens, having lost his wife in 1904, entered a period of what he called “unrest and loneliness,” reflected in his bitter writings of this period, such as The Mysterious Stranger and What Is Man?. He was world-famous as the funnyman Mark Twain and in high demand as a public speaker, but he hated being old without grandchildren. And so he bonded with around a dozen girls between the ages of ten and sixteen. He distributed Angelfish pins among the girls. They wore the pins proudly, wrote warm letters to him, and formed a so-called “Aquarium,” visiting him regularly at a home he built for them on a large property in Redding, Connecticut.

Decades of scholarly digging have yielded no evidence of scandal or impropriety in Clemens's relationships with the Angelfish. Evidently, Clemens treated the girls as pets or beautiful objects in order to satisfy his old-age craving for lost innocence and youth.

Oates puts a distinctly negative spin on Clemens's Angelfish obsession. In some ways, her Clemens is the real-life one: weary of fame, cynical, nervous under the meddlesome care of his daughter Clara, and eager to adopt a grandfatherly role with girls. But Oates holds him guilty of willful cruelty in his treatment of the Angelfish. Here she steps beyond the known facts.

We recognize the distortion when we compare Oates's imagined May-December relationship with the one it most closely resembles: Clemens's friendship with the young New Yorker Gertrude Natkin, whom he met in 1905 and nicknamed Marjorie. In Oates's story, Marjorie appears as Madelyn Avery. Like her real-life model, Madelyn, delighted at having the famous Clemens treat her as his granddaughter, sends him warm letters filled with “blots” (kisses) and signed, “I am the little girl who loves you.” Also like Marjorie, Madelyn loses the attention of the old man after she turns sixteen.

But Oates veers into falsification. While it is true that Clemens lost touch with Marjorie as she grew older, there is no evidence that their separation destroyed her, as Oates suggests. In Oates's retelling, after the separation from Clemens, Madelyn grows increasingly distraught, baring him with lovesick letters. When he fails to answer them, she lapses into anorexic depression. Her parents, incensed at the Clemens's heartlessness, file a lawsuit against him for damages to her health. Oates ends the narrative cynically, depicting Clemens surrounding himself with other bewitching girls while coldly planning to settle the suit by paying off the Averys. (Mark Twain as Michael Jackson!)
All historical fiction, of course, involves distortion. But Oates goes onto a limb by taking some of the most important authors in American literature at their most vulnerable moments and then darkening their lives even further by inventing demeaning episodes. Did Henry James really preserve the gory bandages of young soldiers, worshipping them as sacred relics, and did he once get on his knees and affectionately lick an amputee's bloody leg stump, crying, “I love you! I would die for you!” (173)? Did Hemingway at the moment of his suicide have “an erotic imagining beyond sex” (194), relishing the thought of his soul about to be blasted away along with his brains?

Well…

But, then, Oates's volume is not, as she would be the first to say, strictly biographical. Her stories are fictional meditations, ostensibly about Hemingway and James and other masters but in fact about any artist faced with impending death. Godless, lonely, impotent, broken in body and spirit, Oates's subjects nonetheless are ultimately triumphant. “To end up in a beautiful book,” wrote Mallarmé; “that is what the world was made for.” Oates's subjects have collapsed physically, their minds have cracked, but on some level they all know that in some sense they have overcome death through the creation of enduring literary art.

Christopher Benfey’s *A Summer of Hummingbirds* is similar to Oates’s book only in its treatment of a variety of famous American figures, overlapping with hers in its consideration of Mark Twain and Emily Dickinson. Unlike Oates, Benfey aspires to biographical accuracy. Also unlike her, he considers his subjects not in their senescence but in the full flush of their powers. Oates’s and Benfey’s and books are worlds apart in atmosphere. Hers is full of disturbing images: monsters, blood, piss, sweat, the smoke of cheap cigars, wounds crawling with maggots. His shimmers with rare gems, tropical scenery, erotic flowers, summer landscapes, and colorful birds. Oates probes the pathos of decay and death. Benfey captures human potency and life's beauty.

Benfey finds a common denominator among disparate nineteenth-century cultural figures: their interest in hummingbirds. Most Dickinson aficionados are familiar with her poem about a hummingbird, which she describes as “A Route of Evanescence/With a revolving Wheel —/ A Resonance of Emerald —/ A Rush of Cochineal.” Benfey reveals that many of Dickinson's contemporaries shared her fascination with hummingbirds. The novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe once rescued a wounded hummingbird and kept it as a pet, naming it Hum and sketching the bird perched on a makeshift feeder. The artist Martin Johnson Heade was obsessed by hummingbirds, which were a favorite subject in his paintings. Heade traveled to Brazil in order to observe and paint the rich variety of hummingbirds there. Among others drawn to hummingbirds or the flowers they loved were the reformer and editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the popular preacher Henry Ward Beecher, the Dickinson family friend Mabel Loomis Todd, and, later on, the twentieth-century surrealist Joseph Cornell, who created a collage in honor of Emily Dickinson that included a hummingbird.

Not only were these and others enthralled by hummingbirds; Benfey suggests that, metaphorically, they were hummingbirds, flitting among the flowers of experience and tasting life's nectar, forever on their own routes of evanescence. Stowe not only adopted a hummingbird but had
“pampered hummingbird daughters” (50) and a son, Fred who, after being injured in the Civil War, drifted about and eventually disappeared, like a bird. Henry Ward Beecher, enraptured by things of color and light, had a collection of stuffed hummingbirds, loved gems, filled his sermons with beautiful nature images, and enjoyed fleeting pleasures—infamously with “the birdlike” (165) Elizabeth Tilton, a parishioner’s wife. Beecher decked the pulpit of his Brooklyn church with flowers and foliage and “was always in motion—walking, gesturing, talking” in “sudden flights of passion and poetry.” 142 Mark Twain on a Caribbean voyage was “like a bird of passage,” writes Benfey (137), taken with the tropical vegetation he saw. Higginson had a “floating and ephemeral existence” (152), again like a bird.

Benfey has these human hummingbirds float in and out of our vision, providing brief glimpses of their lives. The result is neither a collective biography nor broad-ranging criticism but rather a succession of biographical vignettes. Benfey himself is a kind of hummingbird, dipping into the multiblossomed bush of nineteenth-century culture, enjoying individual flowers and always going on to the next one. Though roughly chronological, his book follows a zigzag pattern, like a bird’s flight.

Besides loving birds and flowers, Benfey’s subjects frequently expressed interest in the life and poetry of the British Romantic poet Lord Byron. Stowe penned a pamphlet defending Lady Byron’s role in the semi-incestuous love affair her husband had with his half-sister Augusta Leigh. Several Americans felt a special affinity with Byron’s poem “The Castle of Chillon,” about a medieval monk who was imprisoned and came to enjoy his dungeon because it taught him to enjoy the small things of life, such as insects, mice, and the air. This poem resonated particularly strongly with Dickinson, living in self-imposed exile in her Amherst home while responding vibrantly to even the smallest aspects of the world around her.

The lives of Benfey’s subjects periodically intersect and diverge. We begin with the young Higginson, a Civil War colonel, leading a Union regiment that takes over St. Augustine. Higginson then disappears for a while, reemerging in his visits with his protégée Dickinson in Amherst. St. Augustine too disappears and then eventually is mentioned as the place where Stowe and Heade spent the later part of their lives. Meanwhile, we see Stowe’s son receiving a head wound at Gettysburg and then becoming a shell-shocked war veteran and a world traveler who disappears in California. We get descriptions of Stowe’s adoption of Hum, Heade’s visits to Brazil, Beecher’s illicit love affair, Mabel Loomis Todd’s affair with Dickinson’s brother Austin, and Dickinson’s own affair with the Salem judge Otis Lord. Interspersed with these scenes are brief analyses of paintings, such as Heade’s Amethyst Woodstar and poems, including Dickinson’s “I taste a liquor never brewed,” most of them related to hummingbirds.

Benfey’s dip-in-and-out approach captures life’s transience and appeals to our curiosity about the six degrees of separation. Benfey knows the lives of his subjects with such precision that he is able to make unexpected linkages between them. But there is a thinness and arbitrariness about his portrayals of these figures. A shared love of hummingbirds, flowers, or Byron is not intellectually exciting unless it is placed in a larger context. Benfey suggests such a context in his prologue when he says that “Americans during and after the Civil War gradually left behind a static view of existence, a trust in fixed arrangement and hierarchies,” entering “a brave new world of instability and evanescence” that “found perfect expression in the hummingbird” (5). But he does not take up this thesis again, which is just as well, since it seems untenable; actually, the Civil War can be said to have strengthened, not weakened, fixed hierarchies, as it solidified centralized institutions that often ran counter to individualism. Another context
Benfey mentions is the impact of Darwin, who showed that nature was, in Benfey’s words, “a world of flux and interface: birds and flowers were in a dynamic and ever-changing relationship” (185). But Benfey does not press the Darwin connection with scholarly rigor.

Both Oates's and Benfey's books can be best enjoyed as a collation of moving human episodes, with Oates emphasizing the depressing and Benfey the joyful. These episodes often succeed in capturing the spirit of American writers and artists, but they do not form new chapters in cultural history.

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