

Author entertains with stories personal and fictional

By **JEFF DANNA**

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Judging by the audience's response at Elmhurst College March 19, Elmhurst Public Library's selection of award-winning author Joyce Carol Oates as the subject of a new community reading program was inspired.

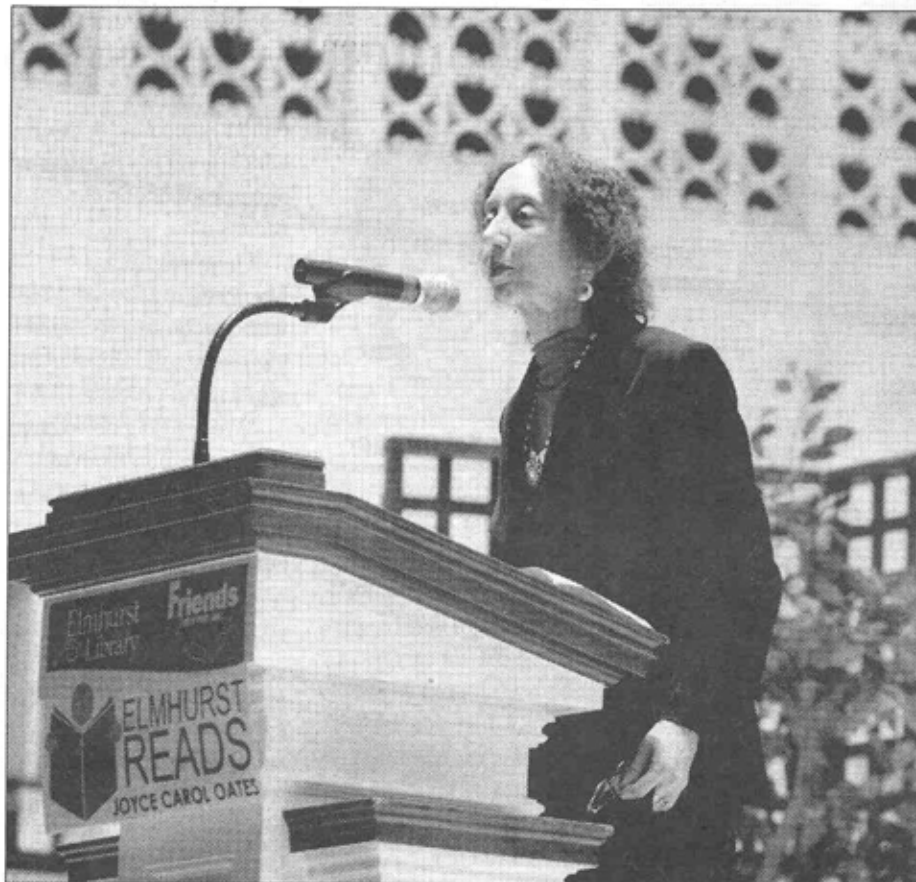
Oates visited the Hammerschmidt Chapel for a lecture and reading, capping off Elmhurst Reads, a library initiative designed to engage the community in the works of a particular author.

For the past six weeks, the library has held lectures, dramatic readings and other events "to expand our knowledge of the works of Joyce Carol Oates," library Director Marilyn Boria said.

And Thursday, Oates herself offered some insight into her writing, sharing an excerpt from a recent collection of stories and addressing numerous topics, including her much-loved, intensely personal novel, "Gravedigger's Daughter."

"I believe art is the highest expression of the human spirit," Oates said.

She talked about how she prefers writing and



Author Joyce Carol Oates reads from some of her work to a full house at Hammerschmidt Chapel at Elmhurst College March 19. Oates was the chosen speaker to cap off Elmhurst Public Library's Elmhurst Reads program. (Curtis Lehmkuhl/The Doings)

reading stories in "mediated voice," an author's simulation of how a character might express him- or herself.

That led into an explanation of "Wild Nights!," a collection of stories about the final days of five American writers: Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway, Henry James, Mark

Twain and Emily Dickinson.

"These ideas sort of come like mad hornets that come buzzing around," she said.

Oates read portions of "EDickinson RepliLuxe," a story that's part fantasy, part science fiction and part historical fiction. Rather than write about

Dickinson's life, she said she wanted to explore people's desire to know more about such a mysterious, elusive figure.

In the story, a married couple in the New York City suburbs purchase a lifelike robot of poet Emily Dickinson, thinking that having a famous historical figure around the house

Library will continue Elmhurst Reads

With Joyce Carol Oates the inspiring first guest of the Elmhurst Reads program, Elmhurst Public Library staff members admit they have a lot to live up to with future programs.

But they are up to the challenge of continuing Elmhurst Reads, an initiative modeled off other cities' programs, such as Chicago's One Book One Chicago.

Elmhurst Public Library's program is slightly different than Chicago's. Instead of focusing on one book, Elmhurst this year focused on one author who would appeal to a wide range of residents, said Cheryl Moore, public information coordinator for the library.

Subsequent programs might continue that trend, or they might focus on a particular genre or theme.

"I've been suggesting my favorite authors," she said with a laugh.

will spice up their lives.

Laughter filtered through the chapel as the author read parts of the story laced with her dry humor, and audience members listened attentively as the story turned darker.

After the reading, Oates took audience questions that ranged from "How tall are you?" (5 feet, 9 inches) to "Are you writing several things simultaneously?" (No.)

Oates put her emotions on display, though, when she answered a question about the inspi-

ration for the main character in "Gravedigger's Daughter."

She said it was based on her grandmother, who had fled Germany for the rural United States with her family in an attempt to erase her past and Jewish heritage.

"No one knew anything about her past," Oates said. "Writing 'Gravedigger's Daughter' was my way of paying homage to my grandmother in all her mystery and complexity."

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