

Book Review

Big Mouth and Ugly Girl, by Joyce Carol Oates
2002 NY: Harper Tempest, \$16.99/\$25.00 CAN
ISBN#0-06-623756 (For good readers from age 11
through young adults)
Reviewed by: S.Frick-Helms, Ph.D.

In her first novel for young adults, Ms. Oates has produced a book, as breathtakingly real as her acclaimed *We Were the Mulvaneys*. This is a story of the pain of being a teenager, of how friendships are broken and new friendships forged, and of how people can survive the cruelty of others.

Matt Donaghy and Ursula Riggs are both juniors in high school. Matt is one of those sorta popular kids. He is always clowning and will say almost anything for a laugh. Ursula is a girl, who is very big for her age – by age 13, taller than all the girls and most of the boys at school – and, at least to herself, awkward and ugly. She protects herself by dressing to emphasize her ugliness, and is a loner.

One morning, two detectives come to the high school and Matt is pulled out of class. By the end of the day, rumors fly that he is being investigated for making bomb threats. Ursula was nearby when the "Threat" was made and she knows it wasn't serious. Against her father and mother's wishes, she comes to Matt's defense. Matt is exonerated but by then many unpleasant events are set in motion. Matt becomes an outcast and Ursula loses the few friends she has. What occurs after this is the story of an unlikely friendship, as these two young people slowly come together to fight the injustices that are occurring.

Matt and Ursula's story should resonate with adults looking back on adolescence, pre-teens looking forward to adolescence, and all teenagers, except the most secure and self-possessed (if there are any of those). Most readers will relate to the painful feelings of rejection that are felt by Matt and Ursula. They will recognize that events can be misconstrued in a way that causes blameless individuals to be blamed and suffer as a result; and, at times, there is nothing anyone can do about it. This is a story about "keeping on" because sometimes that's the only thing that can be done, and about misjudging what's inside people from what is seen on the outside. It's also a story about learning what is of value in life. I would use this book with clients who feel like and/or outcasts, with clients suffering from injustice, and with any adolescent who is hurting.