

FAVORITE

JOYCE CAROL OATES

Author

Photo: Dustin Cohen



Early Spring Sunlight
Charles Burchfield (1893–1967)
1950, watercolor and charcoal
on paper, 25 1/2 x 31 1/8 in.
Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,
gift of Dr. Meyer H. and Ann S. Riwchun, 2000

Joyce Carol Oates knows how to tell a story. For hundreds of pages at a time, she paints vivid images of places and characters who are immersed in complicated scenarios, many of which might be called unpleasant circumstances. But in her dozens of novels and short stories and collections of poetry, whoever she introduces is someone a reader wants to follow. While Oates has been creating stories for decades, she has also been admiring another kind of storyteller, the painter Charles Burchfield (1893–1967).

It is ironic, in some ways, that Oates would like Burchfield's paintings so much, since, as she says, "Burchfield's art contains virtually no human figures." Oates's oeuvre is about humans occupying particular settings and situations. For years, she has owned a Burchfield painting, *Barn through Trees*, that hangs in her Princeton home, and at which she claims to "never tire of looking." But she admits, too, to loving *Early Spring Sunlight* (1950), which is in the permanent collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center at Buffalo State College.

"I was very fortunate to have known Charles Penney," Oates explains, "the wealthy Lockport [New York] resident who had a tremendous Burchfield collection, which he gave to the city of Buffalo to establish a museum. Penney was the most eccentric person I'd ever met. He collected Americana — everything from old bottles and bottlecaps to art. He was a friend of my parents. I wish



that my husband [Ray Smith] and I had purchased more watercolors by Burchfield at a time when they were not so expensive as they are now." The Center holds the largest public collection of works by Burchfield, including some 70 volumes of his handwritten journals and 25,000 drawings and other ephemera.

In looking at *Early Spring Sunlight*, Oates recognizes how it reflects almost all of Burchfield's works — watercolors "suffused with visionary/transcendent light." She adds that his works have "an air of the, at times, almost grotesquely surreal, dreamlike. Burchfield reminds me of [William] Blake — the transcendental/mystical vision in one's backyard."

Many of Oates's novels take place in upstate New York, in and around the very places from which Burchfield and she come. "It is incidental," she insists, however, "that Burchfield comes from a part of the U.S. not far from where I was born and lived until I was 18, and that he lived in Buffalo. I am from a rural community north of Buffalo."

Early Spring Sunlight is, at once, a wholly accessible work showing a snow-bearded landscape, interspersed with nascent seasonal greenery and ramshackle rural structures, but also incorporating a style that's dreamlike, even perhaps disturbing. "Burchfield has immersed himself in the swirl of 'atoms in the void,'" Oates says. "He's given us a sensuous, visual life that all but quivers and shimmers before us." Oates likens Burchfield's watercolors to Winslow Homer's, about which she has written, though she emphasizes that Burchfield's carry a different kind of charge.

Even though this painting and others by Burchfield represent some middle ground between realism and what Oates has called a "mysterious animism," one of Burchfield's friends, Edward Hopper, considered him an accurate observer. As Hopper wrote in 1928, "The work of Charles Burchfield is most decidedly founded, not on art, but on life, and the life that he knows and loves best."