

We Were the Mulvaney

By Joyce Carol Oates

Description:

We Were the Mulvaney is the story of a small-town, close-knit family. The Mulvaney and their four children lead a lovely life on their rambling farm outside a small town in upstate New York, until Valentine's Day, 1976, when their daughter Marianne is raped. The novel explores the impact of the rape on each member of the family, exposing how quickly and completely an assault can change a family's life.

Discussion questions:

- Many survivors blame themselves after their attack. After the rape, Marianne keeps repeating, "I am as much to blame as he is." Does the narrative back this assertion up in any way? Why do you think survivors might feel this way?
- The experience of sexual violence is difficult not only for survivors but also for their loved ones. Both parents reject their daughter after the rape. Why? How are their reasons different? Are we meant to condemn both of them for their cruelty to Marianne? Or is their action somehow understandable?
- Patrick, Marianne's brother, acts to "execute justice" on Marianne's rapist. What do you think the idea of justice means for different survivors and their loved ones?
- Rape and sexual assault are crimes of power and control. At one point, Patrick has the power of life and death in his hands, and chooses not to act on this. Does Oates portray Patrick as straightforwardly good and the perpetrator of Marianne's rape as straightforwardly bad?
- In some ways, media messages about sexual violence and our familiarity with it as an issue has changed over time. If Marianne's rape happened today instead of in the mid-1970s, would the impact on the family and on her life have been very different? What if the Mulvaney's lived in a big city instead of in a small town—would the rape have a different "meaning"?
- Does Oates encourage a traditional good-and-evil reading of her novel? Or does she lead us to reexamine these very categories?

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