

◆ 1977 National Book Critics Award ◆ 1988 Pulitzer Prize  
◆ 1993 Nobel Prize

# TONI MORRISON

"I really think the range of emotions and perceptions I have had access to as a black person and a female person are greater than those of people who are neither. . . . My world did not shrink because I was a black female writer. It just got bigger."

BY JESSICA TEISCH

**T**oni Morrison, the first African-American writer and only the eighth woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, says she writes for African-American audiences. Her exploration of black history, identity, community, and mythology fills her seven major novels, dozens of scholarly essays, and children's books. Certainly, her work serves both as a collective history of a people and, more subtly, a compelling document that charts the universal persistence of racism from slavery to the present. Yet by viewing black culture through a wider American lens, Morrison also probes deeply into universal themes, including gender, familial, and community dynamics. Her ability to link the unique African-American experience with the larger human condition has attracted a large and sympathetic audience.

Morrison (Chloe Anthony Wofford), the second of four children, was born in 1931 in the steel-mill town ("neither plantation nor ghetto") of Lorain, Ohio, after her parents moved north to escape racism. As a child she listened to her father's folktales about the black community and read avidly. Morrison later said that although her favorite Fyodor Dostoevsky novels "were not written for a little black girl in Lorain," they "spoke directly to me out of their own specificity." Later, when she began to write, she strove to capture that same specificity about her own culture.

Morrison enrolled in Howard University in 1949 and received her master's in English from Cornell University in 1955. For the next nine years she taught English at Texas Southern University and Howard. She married Jamaican architect Harold Morrison in 1958. They had two sons, but divorced six years later. In 1966 Morrison, then an editor at Random House, moved to New York City where she nurtured burgeoning African-American writers including Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and Gayl Jones. While working and caring for her children, Morrison joined a creative writing group and developed the seeds of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). *Sula* followed shortly after. The publication of *Song of Solomon* in 1977 gave her international acclaim, and 1987's novel *Beloved*, an immediate success, won the Pulitzer Prize. Since 1987, Morrison, appointed Robert F. Goheen Professor of the Council of the Humanities, has taught in the creative writing, African-American, American studies, and women's studies programs at Princeton University.

## WHERE TO START

**BELOVED**, which Morrison wrote after discovering a shocking article about a fugitive slave, is Morrison's most acclaimed – and perhaps best – book. **SONG OF SOLOMON** combines magical realism in an epic story about one man's quest to understand his ancestry. **THE BLUEST EYE**, her first novel, explores her classic themes of black identity, family, history, and community.



## THE "AVENGING ANGEL"

Morrison, dubbed racism's "avenging angel" by critics, readily acknowledges her difficult relationship with white people. "With very few exceptions," she said, "I feel that White people will betray me" (*Jet Online*, 8/31/98). At age two, the Wofford's landlord set fire to their house. Morrison excelled at the integrated school she attended, but by age 12 she was working for whites. Although her mother optimistically confronted racism in her everyday world, her father, who felt morally superior to whites, never let them in his house.

Morrison's view of black-white relations constantly baffles both political correctness advocates and opponents. Rather than focus on the racial confrontation that defined the "typical" black narrative of the 1960s, Morrison gives voice to black individuals in black communities. "Once I thought," she said, "what is life like if [whites] weren't there? Which is the way I — we lived it, the way I lived it" (*Jet Online*, 8/31/98). Devoid of major white characters, Morrison's novels introduce African-American individuals who struggle with questions of identity, family, history, and "ancestors." *Beloved*, for example, mentions whites and the Civil War only in relation to the main character's heavy consciousness. Still, white America rarely disappears. *The Bluest Eye* challenges standards of beauty by presenting Pecola, an ugly black girl who idolizes Shirley Temple. But her sister, given a blond, blue-eyed doll for Christmas, asks, "What [am] I supposed to do with that? Pretend I am its mother?"

Like William Faulkner, to whom she is constantly

compared, Morrison's style reflects these complex themes. Morrison constantly fuses past and present, memory and myth, magical realism, and modern literary techniques with a poet's search for truth. *Beloved's* sharp, shattered images reflect her characters' broken lives: slavery "had busted [Baby Suggs'] legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue." *Jazz's* narration mirrors the music's syncopated form. Lyrical prose, mythical characterization, and temporal and spatial distortion heighten the almost incomprehensible gravity of her themes.

"When I write," Morrison said in an interview for *Newsweek*, "I don't translate for white readers. . . . Dostoevski wrote for a Russian audience, but we're able to read him. If I'm specific. . . then anyone can overhear me."

## MAJOR WORKS

**The Bluest Eye (1970)**

Morrison began this slim novel during the civil rights struggles in the mid-1960s, but the idea for this "beautiful ugly" story about racial self-loathing entered her mind two decades earlier, when one of her childhood classmates revealed that she had prayed to God for blue eyes. Although the novel did not initially sell well, sales skyrocketed after Oprah Winfrey chose the novel as a Book Club Selection in April 2000.

**THE STORY:** Pecola Breedlove, a poor, black girl, lives in a storefront in Lorain (Morrison's childhood community) with her brother, crippled mother, and alcoholic

\* **The Bluest Eye (1970)**\* **Sula (1973)****The Black Book (1974 - EDITOR)**

This scrapbook contains newspaper clippings, advertisements, recipes, and photographs recording more than 300 years of black life in America.

\* **Song of Solomon (1977)**\* **Tar Baby (1981)****Dreaming Emmett (1986)**

This play about the 1955 murder of a teenager by two white men for allegedly whistling at a white woman was performed but never published.

\* **Beloved (1987)**\* **Jazz (1992)****Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992)**

Morrison examines cultural identity and the black-white dualism in works ranging from Edgar Allen Poe to Willa Cather and Ernest Hemingway.

**Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality (1992 - EDITOR)**

19 academic essays (written by black and white men and women) of scathing commentary on the controversy and aftermath of the Thomas hearings.

**Conversations with Toni Morrison (1994)**

These 24 interviews, recorded between 1974 and 1992, traces Morrison's evolution from personal writer and scholar to one of the best

known voices of the African-American experience.

**To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton (1995 - EDITOR)**  
A compilation of the Black Panther's speeches and writings.

**The Dancing Mind (1997)**  
Morrison's 24-page acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation Medal uses the metaphor "peace of the dancing mind" to describe intellectual openness in the literary community today.

**Birth of Nationhood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case (1997 - CO-EDITOR)**

These essay analyzes the different historical, cultural, sexual, racial, and legal complexities of the Simpson case.

\* **Paradise (1998)** ■

father, whose baby she's carrying. She longs for only one thing: blue eyes. They will, she believes, give her the power to right the world and shake her family's conviction that they are ugly people.

**"Though somewhat overburdened by clichés in both style and content, Morrison's novel is nonetheless a significant addition to the rising tide of black literature. . . . *The Bluest Eye* may not be the fiction find of the year, nor the best first novel ever published; it is, however, a sympathetic and moving portrayal of human beings caught in the age-old webs of prejudice and hate, and for this alone it deserves to be read."** Choice, 10/71.

**"She reveals herself. . . as a writer of considerable power and tenderness, someone who can cast back to the living, bleeding heart of childhood and capture it on paper. . . . the author makes her most telling statement on the tragic effect of race prejudice on children."** Haskel Frankel, NY Times Book Review, 11/1/70.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Morrison's first novel touches on later trademark themes of sexism, victimization, and identity in a black community.

### Sula (1973)

+ National Book Award nominee

Morrison wrote her second novel while working as a senior editor at Random House. "I always thought of *Sula*," Morrison said in an article in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, as "new world black and new world woman. . . . Daring, disruptive, imaginative. . . ."

**THE STORY:** Sula Peace and Nel Wright, childhood friends, live in a decaying black community called The Bottom in the town of Medallion, Ohio. As they grow older, Nel conforms to her troubled community by marrying and having children. Sula, by contrast, lives the "experimental life," challenging the community's codes and mores.



**"[Morrison's] extravagantly beautiful, doomed characters are locked in a world where hope for the future is a foreign commodity, yet they are enormously, achingly alive. And this book about them – and about how their beauty is drained back and frozen – is a howl of love and rage, playful and funny as well as hard and bitter."** Sarah Blackburn, NY Times Book Review, 12/30/73.

**"[*Sula*] seems to me an exemplary fable, its brevity belied by its surprising scope and depth. . . . Morrison's narrative contains symbolical and fabulous elements and is laid out in small set pieces, snapshots arranged in a pattern that cannot be anticipated until the author is done with her surprises."** P. S. Prescott, Newsweek 1/7/74.

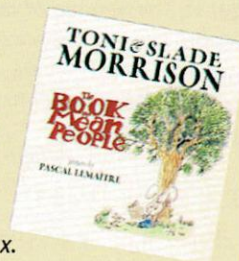
**THE BOTTOM LINE:** About female identity, conformity, and self-sacrifice.

## MORRISON FOR YOUNGER READERS

Morrison and her son Slade have written three children's books together.

### The Big Box (1999)

This enigmatic, rhyming children's story discusses freedom from the perspective of children living in a locked brown box. It received negative reviews for its heavy-handed, moralistic message. (Grades 3-6)



### The Book of Mean People (2002)

A bunny sees meanness all around him – in his frowning father, bullying schoolmates, and pushy mother. Critics received this book more positively than they did *The Big Box*. (Preschool-Grade 2)



### Who's Got Game? The Ant or the Grasshopper? (2003)

Based on Aesop's fable about the organized ant and live-for-today grasshopper, Foxy G and Kid A, living in a contemporary urban setting, learn the meaning of friendship and betrayal. (Grades 2-6)

### Song of Solomon (1977)

+ National Book Critics Circle Award  
+ Book-of-the-Month Club Selection (first black-authored book since 1940's *Native Son*)

Morrison's third novel, a commercial and critical success, secured her place in American letters and gave her an international reputation. It sold 3 million copies and resided on *The New York Times* bestseller list for 16 weeks.

**THE STORY:** *Song of Solomon*, written from a male point of view and with a magical realism style, follows four generations of the Dead family. Macon Dead, an upper-class Northern black businessman with Southern, working-class roots, lives a "white" life. "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people, too," he tells his son, Milkman. But Milkman embraces lower-class black life as he sets out to unearth his ancestors' ghosts, secrets, and heritage.

**"[This novel's] negotiations with fantasy, fable, song and allegory are so organic, continuous and unpredictable as to make any summary of its plot sound absurd; but absurdity is neither Morrison's strategy nor purpose. The purpose seems to be communication of painfully discovered and powerfully held convictions about the possibility of transcendence within human life, on the timescale of a single life."** Reynolds Price, NY Times Book Review, 9/11/77.



**"[This novel] is flashier and more accessible than its predecessors. It is also less striking and less original."**

Margo Jefferson, *Newsweek*, 9/12/77.

**"... Toni Morrison is in control of her book, her poetry. Out of the decoding of a children's song, something heroic standing out of possibility and leap of faith; out of quest, the naming of our fathers and ourselves."** John

Leonard, *NY Times*, 9/6/77.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A family saga as touching and magical as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, to which this novel has been compared.

### Tar Baby (1981)

**A**lthough it received mixed reviews, Morrison's fourth novel, like *Song of Solomon*, made the *New York Times* best seller list. It also put the author on the cover *Newsweek*. Morrison adapted the African-American folktale of Tar Baby and Brer Rabbit to the choices facing modern black men and women in a predominantly white culture. Notably, it's her first novel to introduce significant interaction between black and white characters.

**THE STORY:** On a lush Caribbean island, a beautiful black model, shaped by white culture in Paris and Manhattan, and a black man who represents all of her fears and longings, fall in love. But Jadine and Son's different backgrounds compromise their devotion. Jadine cannot live with Son in the "briar patch" (a black backwater town in Florida), and Son cannot inhabit a "white" Paris or New York.

**"[Tar Baby] is, of course, a black novel, a novel deeply**

### NOBEL PRIZE BANQUET SPEECH

Morrison received the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature for her "novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, [for giving] life to an essential aspect of American reality." She responded:

"... The sweep and specificity of [Laureates'] art have sometimes broken my heart with the courage and clarity of its vision. ... I will leave this hall, however, with a new and much more delightful haunting than the one I felt upon entering: that is the company of Laureates yet to come. Those who, even as I speak, are mining, sifting and polishing languages for illuminations none of us has dreamed of. But whether or not any one of them secures a place in this pantheon, the gathering of these writers is unmistakable and mounting. Their voices bespeak civilizations gone and yet to be; the precipice from which their imaginations gaze will rivet us; they do not blink nor turn away."

-The Nobel Prize Banquet Speech, 12/10/93



perceptive of the black's desire to create a mythology of his own to replace the stereotypes and myths the white man has constructed for him. ... Yet Toni Morrison's greatest accomplishment is that she has raised her novel above the social realism that too many black novels and women's novels are trapped in." John Irving, *NY Times Book*

Review, 3/29/81.

**"[This] is a heavy-handed book, and ultimately unintelligible, with or without prior knowledge of Morrison's preoccupations. ... Throughout the book, momentous diction and arbitrary invention cover an absence of shape and purpose."** Susan Lardner, *New Yorker*, 6/14/81.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** An ambitious if convoluted portrayal of tensions within a large and diverse black community.

### Beloved (1987)

★ Pulitzer Prize

★ National Book Award nominee

**T**he inspiration for *Beloved* came from a 19th-century magazine article Morrison found while working on *The Black Book*. The clipping described how, facing capture, a young runaway slave, Margaret Garner, killed one of her children in order to save her from a similar fate. Although Morrison expressed initial reluctance to write about slavery, she saw the project as turning "Slavery with a capital S" into a "personal experience" (*Time*, 5/22/89).

**THE STORY:** Sethe, a fugitive slave and mother, chooses between love and freedom when she kills her infant, Beloved. In the years following the Civil War, the spirit of the child, full of "baby's venom," haunts Sethe's home in rural Ohio and chases off her sons and mother-in-law. Only the arrival of Paul D., an ex-slave, and a young woman named Beloved produce light.

**"[Beloved is] a hair-raiser. ... If you can believe page one – and Ms. Morrison's verbal authority compels belief – you're hooked on the rest of the book."** Margaret Atwood, *NY*

*Times Book Review*, 9/13/87.

**"This is a huge, generous, humane and gripping novel. ... Morrison's love for her people is Tolstoyan in its detail and greedy curiosity; the reader is inside their doings and sufferings."** A. S. Byatt, *Guardian Unlimited*, 10/16/87.

**"[In this] magnificent novel, ... [a slave's] interior life is re-created with a moving intensity no novelist has even approached before. ... I think we have a masterpiece on our hands here: difficult, sometimes lushly overwritten, but profoundly imagined and carried out with burning fervor."** Walter Clemons, *Newsweek*, 9/28/87.

"[*Beloved*] is designed to placate sentimental feminist ideology, and to make sure that the vision of black woman as the most scorned and rebuked of the victims doesn't weaken. . . . [Morrison] has real talent, an ability to organize her novel in a musical structure, deftly using images as motifs; but she perpetually interrupts her narrative with maudlin ideological commercials." Stanley Crouch, *New Republic*, 10/19/87.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** With its nonlinear narrative style and plot, not an easy read — but well worth the effort.

### Jazz (1992)

Morrison — and her critics — found *Beloved* to be a hard act to follow. Yet *Jazz* earned praise in its own right. Once again, the central plot involves an unfathomable murder and hinges on flashbacks, shifting time sequences, and an unreliable narrator.

**THE STORY:** Set in 1920's Harlem, *Jazz* follows the lives of Joe and Violet Trace, madly in love and married for 20 years. Unfaithful to his hairdresser wife, Joe kills his teenage lover, Dorcas, in a fit of passion "just to keep the feeling going." When Violet mutilates the corpse at the wake, the couple must live with the consequences. **"In sharp compassionate vignettes, plucked from different episodes of their lives, the author portrays people who are together simply because they were put down together. . . . I miss the emotional nexus, the moment short of all artifice that brings us headlong into the deepest recesses of feeling."** Edna O'Brien, *New York Times Book Review*, 4/5/92.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** This novel about the "devil's music" has no clear pattern and shifts back and forth in time. As with jazz, it can be an acquired taste.

### Paradise (1998)



Both positive and negative reviews compared *Paradise* to Faulkner with its narrative style and themes of community, home, ancestors, and the ubiquitous problem of race in the United States. The heart of the novel, however, coalesced around the idea of exclusion. "All paradises, all utopias," Morrison said, "are designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed in" (PBS, 3/9/98). Morrison does not identify the color of the novel's five female victims.

**THE STORY:** Residents proudly call Ruby, a small farming town in Oklahoma founded by freedmen, "the one all-black town worth the pain." But the town lacks all paradisiacal qualities; family feuds and financial problems mar its history. In 1976, nine black men, out to defend their honor, find an easy scapegoat for their problems — five abused women living in "the Convent."

### NOT A BAD CONSOLATION PRIZE

On January 24, 1988, a statement on Morrison's behalf appeared in the *New York Times*. Signed by dozens of esteemed black critics and writers, the letter condemned the National Book Award committee for not granting *Beloved* the award. "Among the fecund intimacies of our hidden past," the letter read, "and among the coming days of dream or nightmares that will follow from the bidden knowledge of our conscious heart, we find your life work ever building to a monument of vision and discovery and trust. You have never turned away the searching eye, the listening ear attuned to horror or to histories providing for our faith. . . . For all of America. . . you have advanced the moral and artistic standards by which we must measure the daring and the love of our national imagination and our collective intelligence as a people."

Two months later, Morrison won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *Beloved*. Addressing the signers of the January letter, she responded by saying, "They redeemed me, but I am certain they played no significant role in the judgment." But some disgruntled writers like Ralph Ellison (author of National Book Award-winning *Invisible Man*, 1953) refused to sign the statement. "Toni doesn't need that kind of support even though it was well-intentioned. . . . I never won a Pulitzer" (*New York Times*, 4/1/88). ■

**"Deftly written, richly layered, cinematic in its detail, *Paradise* is a virtuoso achievement. The novel will reward Morrison readers and challenge them to rethink their dreams about a perfect world."** Carolyn Denard, *Ms*, 3/4/98.

**"*Paradise* is . . . a heavy-handed, schematic piece of writing, thoroughly lacking in the novelistic magic Ms. Morrison has wielded so effortlessly in the past. It's a contrived, formulaic book that mechanically pits men against women, old against young, the past against the present."**

Michiko Kakutani, *The NY Times*, 1/6/98.

**"*Paradise* is the strangest and most original book that Morrison has written. . . . [Morrison] really does see the fallen world as infused with spirit, and she wants her stories to hold out hope, not to validate resentment or despair."** Louis Menand, *New Yorker*, 1/12/98.

**"Critics have long recognized the influence of Faulkner on the passionate, unsentimental Morrison, but it's Hawthorne who seems to brood over *Paradise*, bestowing his mixed blessing of resonant archetypes and risible artificiality. . . . The last paragraph is to die for."** David Gates, *Newsweek*, 1/12/98.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** "They shoot the white girl first" — the opening line — should alert readers to the intensity and moral complexity of this novel. ■