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Toni Morrison: Biography

Diane Stupay 5/4/20

Toni Morrison was one of the rare American authors whose books were both critical and commercial successes. Her estate at her death in 2019 was worth \$20m. She was the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize in literature, in 1993. In awarding her the Nobel, the Swedish Academy cited her “novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import,” through which she gives live to an essential aspect of American reality.”

Morrison was the author of 11 novels as well as children’s books, authored with her son Slade, and numerous essay collections. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eyes* was published in 1970. The story of a little black girl who thought God had forsaken her because she couldn’t have blue eyes. While the novel was not an immediate commercial success, it was used in numerous graduate and undergraduate classes in black history and women’s studies; later becoming a commercial success. Among Morrison’s novels were celebrated works like *Song of Solomon*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977, and *Beloved* (1987) which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. “Song of Solomon” was chosen as a main selection by the Book-of-the-Month Club, the first novel by a black author to be so honored since Richard Wright’s “*Native Son*” in 1940.

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In 1987, Morrison published her most celebrated novel, *Beloved*. *Beloved* is the first of three novels about love and African-American history, sometimes called the Beloved Trilogy. The other two novels in the trilogy are *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise*. *Paradise* (1997) the third novel in the trilogy is about citizens of an all-black town. Morrison said the three novels were intended to be read together, explaining, “The conceptual connection is the search for the beloved—the part of self that is you, and loves you, and is always there for you.”

Morrison’s work express and abiding concern for slavery and its legacy. “In her fiction, the past is often manifest in a harrowing present— a world of alcoholism, rape, incest and murder, recounted in unflinching detail.” This is a world, as Morrison writes in *Beloved*, “where anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. . .Not just kill or maim you, but dirty you,” Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up.”

However, Morrison also makes clear that the past is just as strongly manifest in bonds of family, community and race—bonds that let culture, identity and a sense of belonging be transmitted from from generation to generation. This was particularly true in her family.

Family Toni Morrison was born Chole Ardelia Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, one of four children. Her parents, George Wofford and Ella Ramah (Willis) Wofford named her for her maternal grandmother. Toni was a nick name that began as

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Anthony for St. Antony, a baptismal name Morrison took when she joined the Catholic church at the age of 12. She became Chole Anthony Wofford, at that time.

Morrison's father, George Wofford, was born in Cartersville, Georgia at the turn of the 20th century. Cartersville is currently a suburb of Atlanta. Her mother, Ramah, was born in Greenville Alabama, and moved north with her family as a child.

When George Wofford was 14 or 15 he saw two men hanging from trees, the victims of lynching. These weren't just bodies, these were neighbors, people who owned small businesses in town. Soon afterwards, George Wofford left for California; later settling in Lorain, an integrated working class community. He worked as a welder in the burgeoning ship yards. One day he came home and said I welded a perfect seam and I put my initials on it. Daughter Chole said, "but Daddy, no one will see it.' Her father replied, "It doesn't matter, I know it's there."

Growing up, Chole Wofford knew who she was. She puts it down to class—in her town they were all poor together, black, white, Polish, Spanish, living on the same street, going to the same high school. Also, her parents were fiercely resistant to outside influence. Her mother was the type who tore up eviction notices left on the door. Her father didn't trust anyone from the outside. When Toni was in her teens she took a job as a domestic in a white woman's house. She had never used a vacuum cleaner, my mother used a mop she noted. As she relates, she ran home in distress. Her mother said to quit the job, but she wanted the \$2.00 she would earn. Her father gave her "a

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long stern lecture in which he said, “Go to work, get your money, come home. You don’t live there.” She was not obliged, he said, “to live as they saw her in their imagination.

The family told African-American folk tales, sang African-American folk songs and talked about dreams. In a radio interview I heard soon after I had read *Song of Solomon*, Morrison said that when she was a child her family sat around the breakfast table and told each other their dreams. Everyone was expected to have had a dream.

Education Toni Morrison earned a BA from Howard University. She chose Howard because she wanted to be in the company of black intellectuals. She majored in English and minored in Classics, graduating in 1953. She earned a masters in English from Cornell in 1955. She then taught English at Texas Southern University, a historically black institution in Houston for two years, before returning to Howard as a faculty member.

While at Howard, she met Harold Morrison, an architect from Jamaica. They married in 1958. She was pregnant with their second son when they divorced in 1964. In interviews Ms. Morrison rarely talked about marriage, though she did intimate that her husband wanted a traditional 50s wife, and that she could never be.

Editing and Writing Career After the birth of her second son in 1965, Morrison moved with her sons to Syracuse, where she took a job as an editor with a textbook division of

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Random House. It was during this time that she began writing *The Bluest Eyes* as a way to fill the lonely time between work and parenting in an unfamiliar city. In a 2015 interview with Emma Broeckes in *The Guardian*, “She felt very strongly when she sat down to write *The Bluest Eyes*. She would not she decided, try to “explain” black life to a white audience. She would not write from the position of an outsider to her own experience. . .So I’m trying to say in the *Bluest Eyes*, wait a minute. Guys. There was a time when black wasn’t beautiful. And it hurt.” Elsewhere, she noted that she wrote *The Bluest Eyes* because it was a book she wanted to read.

After two years in Syracuse, Morrison transferred to the New York division of Random House where she became their first black woman senior editor in the fiction department. Morrison played a vital role in bringing black literature into the mainstream. She fostered a new generation of Afro-American writers including the poet Toni Cade Bambara, radical activist Angela Davis, Black Panther Huey Newton. She also brought to publication, the autobiography of Muhammad Ali. Among other books Morrison developed and edited is *The Black Book* (1974). This is an anthology of photographs, illustrations, essays, and documents of black life in the United States from the time of slavery to the 1920s. While working on *The Black Book*, Morrison found the story of Margaret Garner. Garner had escaped slavery, but was pursued by slave hunters. Facing a return to slavery, she killed her 2 year-old daughter but was captured before she could kill herself. This was the inspiration for *Beloved*.

Alvin Beam reviewed the *Black Book* for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, writing, “Editors, like novelists, have brain children—books they think up and bring to life without putting their own names on the title page. Mrs. Morrison has one of these in the stores now,

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and and magazines and newsletters in the publishing trade are ecstatic, saying it will go like hotcakes.”

In 1983, Morrison left publishing to devote more time to writing, while living on a converted house boat on the Hudson River. In 1984 she was appointed to an Albert Schweitzer chair at the University at Albany. From 1989 until her retirement in 2006, Morrison held the Robert F. Goheen Chair in Humanities at Princeton University. Morrison did not regularly offer writing workshops to students after the 1990's. Rather she developed the Princeton Atelier, a program that brings together students with writers and performing artists. Together the students and the artists produced works of art that are presented to the public after a semester of collaboration.

In her later years, Morrison received numerous honors and honorary degrees. In 2017, Princeton University dedicated Morrison Hall in her honor. The Toni Morrison Papers are part of the permanent library collections of Princeton University. In 2019, a resolution was passed in Lorain, Ohio and later through the state of Ohio, to designate February 18, her birthday, “Toni Morrison Day.” The Toni Morrison society was founded in 1993 at the annual meeting of the American Literature Association. Twenty-six scholars and supporters of Morrison's work established The Toni Morrison Society. The society was the 41st author society and the 4th dedicated to an African American author. After Morrison won the Nobel Prize, membership in the society grew exponentially with members from Japan, Ghana, Egypt, Canada, Brazil etc. One could write a dissertation on aspects of the life and work of Toni Morrison and in fact I'm sure many have been written.

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