

TONI MORRISON

author of many voices

On August 5, 2019, the fierce, eloquent flag-bearer of African American literature passed away at age 88.

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When I think of Toni Morrison's oeuvre, the word 'geod' comes to mind. A composite whole—each novel, each essay tightly knitted, contained by the solidity and confidence of its author's direction of ideas. You think you know what to expect, given the ubiquity of its cultural influence. But split it open, delve into the pages, and you're stunned by the polyphonic insides. Her stories and nonfiction are populated by voices, memories, by colliding experiences, all of which reveal a sparkling, thriving, labyrinthine world. Morrison devoted the five decades of her writing life into ensuring that this depiction was that of the black experience, complete with its pains and joys, its unique struggles and personalities.

Chloe Anthony Wofford (or Toni as we know her) was part of a household shaped by the socio-economic implications of racism in America, and one that cultivated a love of black literature, music, and folklore. Both sets of her grandparents had had to flee sharecropping in Alabama and violence against African Americans in the south respectively, before settling in the steel-mill town of Lorain in Ohio. Born in 1931, Toni grew up at a time when the 1930s' Great Depression would have been especially taxing on a black, working class family. Her father George Wofford, a welder among two other jobs, was strongly distrustful of whites. Her mother Ramah Willis Wofford, who worked as a domestic worker, was slightly more hopeful of seeing race relations change in the country. Toni and her siblings were encouraged as children to internalise and get creative with these realities, listening to stories, remembering stories, even telling, changing, and performing them at home: "...to make us, and the race, confront the terrible things that were happening, to know that you could protect yourself through cunning and wit, by strength," she told the *Denver Post* in a 2003 interview.

Doing justice to the black experience through language became Toni's primary project. She did the job magnificently not because she simply wrote about African American characters, but because of the way she went about it.

Her fiction doesn't tell stories of black lives. It exists as a space in which black characters live out their experiences in real time, even as they repress and recollect past trauma. The stage time allowed to each of her characters is perhaps the most noticeable and admirable quality of Toni Morrison's work.

Take *Beloved* (1987), a novel about a tiny black life forced to end even before it has finished crawling and learned to walk. *Beloved's* existence is short-lived because it is innately 'raced', because generations of the child's ancestors have known only captivity under the white race, and because her mother Sethe, having just tasted freedom, would rather split the toddler's throat open than allow her back into slavery. The novel is populated, *densely*, by voices. Its structure forces us to spend time with each of them, so that we know how each person involved perceives a particular incident. Remember Sethe, her husband Halle, and Paul D who would later become her lover, all slaves at the Sweet Home plantation. If here a paragraph shows Sethe hurting, raging because Paul D didn't charge Halle enough for his passivity while Sethe was being tortured, there another chapter steps inside Paul D's mind. It reveals exactly why he remains silent, consumed by the pain of being gagged with the 'iron bit' in his mouth.

Morrison reveals these sufferings through echoes and memory and seldom through dialogue. It's neither a case of miscommunication in the plot, nor a crude ploy by the text to generate mystery and agitation for the reader's entertainment. It's about showing how words simply



fail at describing certain experiences. Discussing this scene with Paul D in her famous "The Art of Fiction" interview with *The Paris Review*, she explained how, "It was important to imagine the 'bit' as an active instrument, rather than simply as a curio or an historical fact. I wanted to show the reader what slavery *felt* like, rather than how it looked." As readers, as a result, we all but drown in the characters' personal journeys—be it Denver, Sethe, Paul D, or Baby Suggs—but we're snatched back just in time to remember that the story is ultimately *Beloved's*.

Their agonies may ring loud and true (as they should), but it is the pain of the most voiceless, the one most abruptly silenced, that Morrison manifests into an entire novel. She names the very book after her.

Speaking to the *Guardian*, Morrison once acknowledged how she couldn't tap into standard recorded 'history' to contextualise these stories. It would be ridiculous for her to look to Lewis Mumford or Thomas Jefferson's version of American history, or to Hemingway, Conrad, or Melville's portrayals of it even when they wrote about black characters.

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