

Toni Morrison



The Muse of Howard

Toni Morrison's first impression of Washington, D.C., when she enrolled at Howard in 1949 was, in her words, "shocking." The segregated transportation, restaurants and schools, along with the vibrant Black community in D.C., proved to be an experience quite different from her childhood growing up in working class Lorain, Ohio. In D.C., she recalls one restaurant downtown for Blacks and not being allowed to try on hats at department stores, a jolting introduction to society's imposed limitations based on race.

"In Lorain, there were many immigrants from Poland, Hungary and Mexico, but there were no Black neighborhoods," she says. "I had never been in touch with people who made decisions based on skin color, and there was a lot of that in Washington, D.C., that I didn't know about. It was an education for me."

Taking Flight

Morrison was known as Chloe Anthony Wofford in those days and the trajectory that propelled her into becoming the Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning author began, in some ways, with those new and unlikely experiences she had at Howard. Her education at "the Mecca" was nurtured by her participation with the Howard Players, which she joined after arriving on campus. For three summers, she toured with the Players at Black colleges in the segregated South. Touring with Anne Cook, James William Butcher and John Lovell, Morrison and her peers were housed in Black churches and treated to homecooked meals by caring Black patrons, which helped shield them from the sting of Jim Crow.

"It was an amazing experience," she recalls. "Both my parents were from the South and I had different versions from them. This was the first time I had been in the South without the scary South that my father knew because he had seen people lynched in his neighborhood; or the sweet romantic South that my mother always talked about."

An English major and classics minor, Morrison learned to read plays for performance and sound while studying with the Players. The stage also provided a respite from society's preoccupation with race and social status.

"The big thing for me was the cultural education that I could have only gotten here by my travel with the Howard Players," she says. "The theater was so different because your skin color, your money, none of that mattered. It was whether you could deliver on stage. That was a comfort to me."

After Morrison graduated, she earned her master's degree from Cornell University in 1955 and began teaching at Texas Southern University. She returned to Howard to teach in 1957 during the civil rights movement. Department of English Chair Eleanor Traylor, Ph.D., became friends with Morrison during this time.

"We shared a common purpose," says Traylor. "We were movement children. We were fully vested in the civil rights movement and completely engaged in what it meant for our students." Activist Stokely Carmichael and author Claude Brown were two of Morrison's former students.

While teaching at Howard, Morrison joined a writing group and penned a short story that featured a poor little Black girl who longed to have blue eyes. After she left Howard and went to work as an editor for Random House, Morrison developed the short story into the groundbreaking novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which was published in 1970.

Her prolific career had begun. She followed up *The Bluest Eye* with *Sula* (1974); *Song of Solomon* (1977); *Tar Baby* (1981); *Beloved*, which won Morrison a Pulitzer Prize (1987); *Jazz* (1992); *Paradise* (1999); and *Love* (2003). Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, becoming the first Black woman to earn that honor.

Pre-Racial v. Post-Racial

Morrison's novels are gripping explorations of the country's treatment of African Americans and the long-term effects of slavery and racism on the human psyche. Her books also touch on themes of sacrifice, survival, motherhood, forgiveness and the search for identity.

In her newest novel, *A Mercy*, she takes a step back further in time to what some might call a "pre-racial" era in the nation's history, before the advent of racial hierarchy. Morrison examines enslavement in its many forms. The novel's main character, Jacob, is a White Dutch trader who inherits land in upstate

New York from his uncle. Jacob detests slavery but conforms to the customs of the day, by owning three slaves (one Native American, two Black) and two White indentured servants. He meets his wife—"promised" to him—for the first time after she arrives from London.

"Slavery was the most common status of people in the world, and there was no empire at all and no city that did not rest on slaves," she says. "That's true of Athens, it's true of Rome; it's true wherever you go. But the new thing was racial hierarchy. In those days, in 1680, White indentured servants and Black slaves, they all worked together."

With the election of the first Black president, some are debating whether the nation has moved closer to what would be considered a post-racial era. Whether or not it is time to forego racial categories, Morrison looks at her students at Princeton University, where she is a *professor emerita*, and can see the melting away of long-held discriminatory beliefs.

"It's hard to get caught up in labels," she says. "You are not born a racist. Racism has to be taught and sustained and has to benefit somebody. When it stops being beneficial to somebody, monetarily or for political gain, then it ceases to exist."

"You saw some of that in this past presidential election," she con-

tinues. "Tactics were used to try to separate people because of their skin color. But that was the interesting thing about this election—the collapse of that. It still exists but in general this younger generation is not interested in those separate categories."

Her students are worlds away



from the young Black woman who wasn't allowed to try on hats at the department stores in D.C., or the young woman who found her voice with the Howard Players. But they can learn a thing or two from Morrison, a muse who through her novels has always challenged her readers to stare the ugliness of racial discrimination in the face and to break free of society's imposed limitations. **f**

Padgett is Editor of *Howard Magazine*.



15th Annual Heart's Day

Fifteen years ago, a small group of people braved the cold and knee-deep snow in February to launch the Department of English's Heart's Day celebration to commemorate its intellectual traditions. The first honoree—Toni Morrison—read from her

Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Beloved*, that night. Throughout the years, esteemed literati like Edward P. Jones, Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, Chinua Achebe and Gwendolyn Brooks have also been honored. This year marked a homecoming of sorts for Morrison, who was honored a second time at Heart's Day.

"A Daughter's Return: The Fiction of Toni Morrison" featured a one-day conference and an evening gala tribute. The

conference featured a series of panel discussions and paper presentations that focused on a range of Morrison's work, with topics such as "Approaches to Morrison's Fiction" and "Morrison and Women's Studies." Following the conference, Morrison attended the gala and read from her latest novel, *A Mercy*.

Proceeds from the gala are earmarked to support the department's effort to complete funding for the Sterling A. Brown Endowed Chair. Brown taught at Howard for more than 40 years and some of his most famous students include Amiri Baraka, Ossie Davis and Morrison.

"The real celebration of Heart's Day is the passing on of the ancestral gift, when this generation passes on to an emergent generation imperishable ancestral gifts" says Department of English Chair Eleanor Traylor, Ph.D. "It is also a day when we particularly acknowledge in appreciation the genius flowing from this historical, mythical and legendary peristyle called Howard University."