

# *Toni Morrison, Towering Novelist of the Black Experience, Dies at 88*

---

The author Toni Morrison has died at the age of 88. She was the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature and best known for her nuanced discussion of race in America.

By [Margalit Fox](#)

- Aug. 6, 2019

[Toni Morrison](#), the Nobel laureate in literature whose best-selling work explored black identity in America — and in particular the often crushing experience of black women — through luminous, incantatory prose resembling that of no other writer in English, died on Monday in the Bronx. She was 88.

Her death, at Montefiore Medical Center, was announced by her publisher, Alfred A. Knopf. A spokeswoman said the cause was complications of pneumonia. Ms. Morrison lived in Grand View-on-Hudson, N.Y.

The first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1993, Ms. Morrison was the author of 11 novels as well as children's books and essay collections. Among them were celebrated works like "Song of Solomon," which received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977, and "[Beloved](#)," which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988.

[Ms. Morrison](#) was one of the rare American authors whose books were both critical and commercial successes. Her novels appeared regularly on the New York Times best-seller list, were featured multiple times on Oprah Winfrey's television book club and were the subject of myriad critical studies. A longtime faculty member at Princeton, Ms. Morrison lectured widely and was seen often on television.

In awarding her the Nobel, the Swedish Academy cited her "novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import," through which she "gives life to an essential aspect of American reality."

Ms. Morrison [animated that reality](#) in prose that rings with the cadences of black oral tradition. Her plots are dreamlike and nonlinear, spooling backward and forward in time as though characters bring the entire weight of history to bear on their every act.



Toni Morrison in an undated photo. Her prose, often luminous and incantatory, rings with the cadences of black oral tradition. Credit...James L. McGuire

Her narratives mingle the voices of men, women, children and even ghosts in layered polyphony. Myth, magic and superstition are inextricably intertwined with everyday verities, a technique that caused Ms. Morrison's novels to be likened often to those of Latin American magic realist writers like [Gabriel García Márquez](#).

In "Sula," a woman blithely lets a train run over her leg for the insurance money it will give her family. In "Song of Solomon," a baby girl is named Pilate by her father, who "had thumbed through the Bible, and since he could not read a word, chose a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome." In "Beloved," the specter of a murdered child takes up residence in the house of her murderer.

Throughout Ms. Morrison's work, elements like these coalesce around her abiding concern with 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.

It is a world, Ms. Morrison writes in "[Beloved](#)" (the novel is set in the 19th century but stands as a metaphor for the 20th), in which "anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind."

"Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you," she goes on. "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."

But as Ms. Morrison's writing also makes clear, the past is just as strongly manifest in the bonds of family, community and race — bonds that let culture, identity and a sense of belonging be transmitted from parents to children to grandchildren. These generational links, her work unflinchingly suggests, form the only salutary chains in human experience.



Ms. Morrison with her sons, Slade and Ford, at her home in 1978. At her death she lived in Grand View-on-Hudson, N.Y. Credit... Jack Mitchell/Getty Images  
“She is a friend of my mind,” a character in “Beloved,” a former slave, thinks about the woman he loves. “She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It’s good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind.”

## **A First Doomed Heroine**

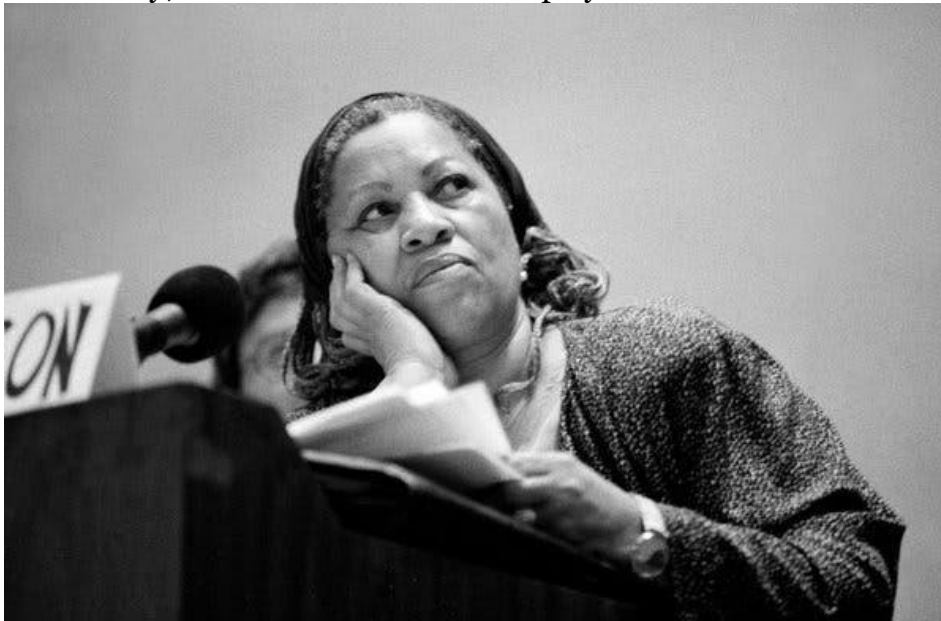
Ms. Morrison’s singular approach to narrative is evident in her first novel, “The Bluest Eye,” written in stolen moments between her day job as a book editor and her life as the single mother of two young sons. Published in 1970, it is narrated by Claudia McTeer, a black girl in Ohio, who with her sister, Frieda, is the product of a strict but loving home.

The novel’s doomed heroine is their friend Pecola Breedlove, who at 11, growing up in an America inundated with images of Shirley Temple and Dick and Jane, believes she is ugly and prays for the one thing she is sure will save her: blue eyes.

In a drunken, savagely misguided attempt to show Pecola she is desirable, her father rapes her, leaving her pregnant. Now an outcast both in the community and within her own fractured family, Pecola descends into madness, believing herself possessed of blue eyes at last.

[Reviewing the novel](#) in The New York Times, John Leonard commended Ms. Morrison for telling the story “with a prose so precise, so faithful to speech and so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry.”

The novel prefigures much of Ms. Morrison’s later work in its preoccupation with history — often painful — as seen through the lens of an individual life; with characters’ quests, tragic or successful, for their place in the world; with the redemptive power of community; and with the role women play in the survival of such communities.



Ms. Morrison was the keynote speaker at a writers’ conference in New York in 1992. Her later work was preoccupied with history — often painful — as seen through the lens of an individual life. Credit...Lee Romero/The New York Times

[Ms. Morrison](#) explored these themes even more overtly in her second novel, “[Sula](#)” (1973), about the return of a young woman, now a scandalous temptress, to her Midwestern hometown and the ostracism she confronts there, and in her third, “[Song of Solomon](#)” (1977), the book that cemented her reputation.

That book, Ms. Morrison’s first to feature a male protagonist, centers on the journey, literal and spiritual, of a young Michigan man, Macon Dead III.

Macon is known familiarly as Milkman, a bitter nickname stemming from the widespread knowledge that his unhappy, neurasthenic mother, “the daughter of the richest Negro doctor in town,” breast-fed him long past babyhood. (In “[Song of Solomon](#)” as in “[Sula](#),” Ms. Morrison depicts black bourgeois life as one of arid atomization.)

The novel chronicles Milkman’s journey through rural Pennsylvania, a trip nominally undertaken to recover a cache of gold said to have belonged to his family, but ultimately a voyage in pursuit of self.

“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.



Ms. Morrison in 1986. She was one of the rare American authors whose books were both critical and commercial successes. Credit...Jack Manning/The New York Times

## ‘Beloved’: Her Masterwork

[Ms. Morrison published “Beloved,”](#) widely considered her masterwork, in 1987. The first of her novels to have an overtly historical setting, the book — rooted in a real 19th-century tragedy — unfolds about a decade after the end of the Civil War.

Before the war, Sethe, a slave, had escaped from the Kentucky plantation on which she worked and crossed the Ohio River to Cincinnati. She also spirited out her baby daughter, not yet 2.

“Sethe had twenty-eight days — the travel of one whole moon — of unslaved life,” [Ms. Morrison](#) wrote. “From the pure clear stream of spit that the little girl dribbled into her face to her oily blood was twenty-eight days. Days of healing, ease and real- talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better. One taught her the alphabet; another a stitch. All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day.”

Then a slave catcher tracks Sethe down. Cornered, she cuts her daughter’s throat rather than see her returned to a life of degradation.

Eighteen years pass. Sethe has been saved from the gallows by white Abolitionists and is later freed from jail with their help. She has resumed her life in Cincinnati with her surviving daughter, Denver, with whom she was pregnant when she fled Kentucky.

One day, a strange, nearly silent young woman a little older than Denver materializes at their door. Known only as Beloved, she moves into the house and insinuates herself into every facet of their existence.



Ms. Morrison receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama in 2012. The medal was among the many laurels she received in her writing career. Credit...Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

“Beloved, she my daughter,” Sethe realizes in a stream-of-consciousness monologue toward the end of the book. “She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing. I didn’t have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be.”

Widely acclaimed by book critics, “Beloved” was made into a [1998 feature film](#) directed by Jonathan Demme and starring Ms. Winfrey.

For mid-20th-century readers, one of the most striking things about [Ms. Morrison’s work](#) was that it delineates a world in which white people are largely absent, a relatively rare thing in fiction of the period.

What was more, the milieu of her books, typically small-town and Midwestern, “offers an escape from stereotyped black settings,” as she said in an interview in “Conversations With Toni Morrison” (1994; edited by Danielle Taylor-Guthrie), adding, “It is neither plantation nor ghetto.”

## Origins of a Nickname

It was in just such a setting that [Ms. Morrison](#) herself was reared. The daughter of George Wofford and Ella Ramah (Willis) Wofford, she was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford on Feb. 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, an integrated working-class community about 30 miles west of Cleveland.

George Wofford was a shipyard welder who took such pride in his work that, according to many accounts of Ms. Morrison's life, when he finished a perfect seam he would write his initials on it, where they endured, unseen, in the skeleton of the ship.



Ms. Morrison in 1994 at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York. In granting her the Nobel the year before, the Swedish Academy cited the “visionary force and poetic import” of her novels, through which she “gives life to an essential aspect of American reality.” Credit...Kathy Willens/Associated Press

Young Chloe grew up in a house suffused with narrative and superstition. She adored listening to ghost stories; her grandmother ritually consulted a book on dream interpretation, from which she divined the day's selections when she played the numbers.

At 12, Chloe joined the Roman Catholic Church. She took the baptismal name Anthony, becoming known as Chloe Anthony Wofford.

That name would be the seed from which her nickname would spring a few years later, when she was an undergraduate at Howard University in Washington. She began calling herself Toni then, she said, because her classmates found the name Chloe bewildering.

After receiving a bachelor's degree from Howard with a major in English and a minor in classics in 1953, she earned a master's in English from Cornell in 1955. She taught English for two years at Texas Southern University, a historically black institution in Houston, before returning to Howard as a faculty member.

There, she joined a fiction workshop and began writing in earnest. Required to bring a sample to a workshop meeting, she began work on a story about a black girl who craves blue eyes — the kernel of her first novel.

In 1958, she married Harold Morrison, an architect from Jamaica; they were divorced in 1964. In interviews, Ms. Morrison rarely spoke of the marriage, though she intimated that her husband had wanted a traditional 1950s wife — and that, she could never be.

After her divorce, Ms. Morrison moved with her sons to Syracuse, where she took a job as an editor with a textbook division of Random House. A stranger in the city, she found herself achingly lonely. In the interstices between work and motherhood, she began turning her short story into “The Bluest Eye.”

In the late 1960s, Ms. Morrison moved to New York City and took an editorial position with Random House’s trade-book division. Over the nearly two decades she held the post, her authors included Angela Davis, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara and Muhammad Ali.

“I look very hard for black fiction because I want to participate in developing a canon of black work,” Ms. Morrison said in an interview quoted in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*. “We’ve had the first rush of black entertainment, where blacks were writing for whites, and whites were encouraging this kind of self-flagellation. Now we can get down to the craft of writing, where black people are talking to black people.”

One of the nonfiction projects on which she worked at Random House was “[The Black Book](#),” published in 1974. Compiled by Ms. Morrison, the volume is a lavishly illustrated scrapbook spanning three centuries of African-American history, reproducing newspaper clippings, photographs, advertisements, handbills and the like.

Researching the book, Ms. Morrison came across a 19th-century article about a fugitive slave named Margaret Garner who, on the point of recapture near Cincinnati, killed her infant daughter. More than a decade after “The Black Book” appeared, the story would become the armature of “Beloved.”

## **A Letter and a Prize**

Critical response to “Beloved” was overwhelmingly positive, though not uniformly so. In a corrosive review in *The New Republic*, the African-American critic Stanley Crouch called it “a blackface holocaust novel,” adding: “The world exists in a purple haze of overstatement, of false voices, of strained homilies; nothing very subtle is ever really tried. ‘Beloved’ reads largely like a melodrama lashed to the structural conceits of the miniseries.”

Image





Ms. Morrison in 2008, when she published her novel “A Mercy,” which dealt with slavery and servitude in the 17th century. Credit...Damon Winter/The New York Times

But the preponderance of opinion was on the other side. In January 1988, in the wake of the novel’s publication, The Times Book Review [published an open letter](#) signed by two dozen black writers, among them Maya Angelou, Amiri Baraka, Arnold Rampersad and Alice Walker, lauding Ms. Morrison and protesting the fact that she had “yet to receive the keystone honors of the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize.”

“Beloved” won the Pulitzer Prize that April. In 2006, after polling hundreds of writers, editors and critics, The Book Review named the novel the best American work of fiction of the previous quarter-century.

Ms. Morrison’s fourth novel, “[Tar Baby](#)” (1981), deals explicitly with issues of racial and class prejudice among black people. Set on a Caribbean island, it chronicles the love affair of a cosmopolitan, European-educated black woman with a rough-and-tumble local man.

Her other novels include “[Jazz](#)” (1992), set in 1920s New York; “[A Mercy](#)” (2008), which divorces the institution of slavery from ideas of race by setting the narrative in the 17th century, where servitude, black or white, was apt to be determined by class; and “[Home](#)” (2012), about a black Korean War veteran’s struggles on returning to the Jim Crow South.

Ms. Morrison’s volumes of nonfiction include “[Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination](#)” (1992) and “What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction” (2008, edited by Carolyn C. Denard).

She wrote the libretto for “Margaret Garner,” an opera by Richard Danielpour that received its world premiere at the Detroit Opera House in 2005 with the mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves in the title role.

In 1989, Ms. Morrison joined the faculty of Princeton, where she taught courses in the humanities and African American studies, and was a member of the creative writing program. She went on emeritus status in 2006.

Ms. Morrison is survived by her son Harold Ford Morrison and three grandchildren. Another son, Slade, with whom she collaborated on the texts of many books for children, died in 2010.

Her other laurels include the National Humanities Medal in 2000 and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, presented in 2012 by President Barack Obama. The Toni Morrison Society, devoted to the study of her life and work, was founded in 1993.

If there is a unifying thread running through Ms. Morrison’s writing, it is perhaps nowhere more vivid than in “Song of Solomon.” At novel’s end, after his odyssey through his ancestral past, Milkman has attained the knowledge that lets him situate himself within his family, the larger community and black America.

And with that, on the book’s final page, he leaps into the air, taking symbolic flight over a world in which he has found his place at last.