

Chapter 1

Life

Speaking after the Cincinnati premiere of the opera *Margaret Garner* in 2005, Morrison recounted being told that she had won the Nobel Prize. A colleague from Princeton had called her early in the morning with the news, which was broadcast on television before Morrison had even been told. That afternoon, the chair of the selection committee called her from Stockholm to confirm the award. “Could you put that in writing?” Morrison asked the judge, and it was not until the decision came through on the fax machine that she really believed it was true. “I mean, you know,” she told her Cincinnati audience, “I’m just a girl from Lorain.”

So much you need to know about Toni Morrison is contained within that anecdote, not least her humorous-and-yet-dignified mode of self-presentation. To think of her as “just a girl from Lorain” is of course absurd – she could never be “just” anything – and yet her birthplace, which then became the setting for *The Bluest Eye*, is an unquantifiable part of who she is. And it is one of the paradoxes of her life story that, having risen to a position of huge success and wealth from humble origins and through gifts cultivated by immense hard work and sacrifice, her life story embodies the archetypal “American Dream” that her own novels subject to such skeptical scrutiny. There is to date no full-length authorized biography of Morrison to direct you to, no formal autobiography, and no published volumes of letters or diaries. There are, however, many wonderful interviews in which the author talks thoughtfully and in striking detail about her life and its relationship to her work. There are also the recent forewords to the Vintage editions of the novels, each of which gives a tantalizing glimpse of a different period in her life, and of its relationship to the novel being prefaced. Put together they do constitute life story of sorts. There already exist, as well, several biographical essays and chronologies of Morrison’s life and career; all of these have informed the account that I give here.¹

The following sketch of Toni Morrison’s life is divided into four sections. The first is an account of her childhood and formal education, concluding with the completion of her master’s degree at Cornell University in 1955. The second examines her two decades of teaching, editing, writing, and mothering up to

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the landmark success that greeted the publication of *Song of Solomon* in 1977. The third covers the period of consolidating literary and critical achievements, including the publication of *Beloved* in 1987 and *Jazz* and *Playing in the Dark* in 1992. These are her early years in an endowed chair at Princeton University, culminating in the winning of the Nobel Prize in 1993. The final section considers post-Nobel Toni Morrison, taking in the publication of *Paradise* (1998), *Love* (2003), and *A Mercy* (2008). While my account goes only as far as 2011, the year in which she turned eighty, it also looks forward to the publication of her tenth novel, *Home*, in May 2012.

1931–1955

Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, when Morrison was born to parents who had both migrated from the South as children, was a small, typical Rust Belt town. The author has often joked about being “a child of the Depression,” has talked about having to move at least six times in search of cheaper rent as a child, and has described her family as “very poor.” Her father, George Wofford, was from Georgia, and during Morrison’s childhood he held down several jobs consecutively, including working as a welder at the nearby U.S. Steel plant, in order to support his four children. Morrison’s mother, Ella Ramah Wofford (née Willis), had moved to Lorain with her own parents; they had come from Alabama via Kentucky. Morrison’s maternal grandparents, Ardelia and John Solomon Willis, were hugely influential figures in her life. The author has frequently referred, as well, to the fact that John’s mother (Morrison’s great-grandmother) was Native American. It is surely significant that minor characters in her fiction often share the first names of real relatives: in *Beloved*, for example, one of Baby Suggs’s lost children is called Ardelia. In *Song of Solomon*, meanwhile, Milkman discovers himself to be of mixed Native and African-American heritage. The novelist’s weaving of the details of her life into her art indicates her deeply held conviction that an individual’s experiences and the nation’s history, or the personal and the political, are inextricably bound.

Morrison’s name at her birth was Chloe Ardelia Wofford. While “Morrison” became her surname at her marriage in 1958, there is no consensus about how she became known as “Toni.” According to the *New Yorker* journalist Hilton Als, when aged twelve she converted to Roman Catholicism and chose “Antony” as her baptismal name (*GiA* 67). She has told other sources, however, that “Toni” became her nickname when she was a young adult.² Chloe was her parents’ second child and second daughter, to be followed by two brothers, and Morrison has often spoken of her close relationship with her elder sister, Lois. Her mother was an active member of the local African Methodist Episcopal

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Church and its choir. “She sang, my mother, the way other people muse,” writes Morrison. “Ave Maria, gratia plena ... I woke up this morning with an awful aching head / My new man has left me just a room and a bed ... Precious Lord, lead me on” (*J* xiii). Meanwhile her grandfather played the violin, and all the adults in her life were avid storytellers and conversationalists. They “could move easily into the language of the King James Bible and then back to standard English, and then segue into language that we would call street,” Morrison recalled in 1996 (*DC* 131). This culturally rich environment – the music, the storytelling, the central place of the Bible, and the close-knit nature of her family – is an obvious and profound presence in Morrison’s work.

The author was the only African-American student in her first grade class, and her neighborhood was anything but uniformly black. The town’s population was diverse due to immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe who also worked at U.S. Steel; Morrison says this made her “sensitive to languages very early” (*DC* 203, 131). Despite the mixed nature of her milieu, however, as Morrison has wryly observed, the adults who raised her held “widely disparate and sometimes conflicting views” about race. Her parents “differed about whether the moral fiber of white people would ever improve” (*WMM* 6). The author “grew up with a complicated notion of the South, neither sentimental nor wholly frightening”: her mother was “nostalgic” but never returned there; her father “recounted vividly the violence he had seen at first-hand from White southerners” but “went back to Georgia every year” (*DC* 178).

Race relations in Lorain itself were no less complicated. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison describes the town and its Lake Erie shore as a “melting pot on the lip of America facing the cold but receptive Canada,” a town that “boasted an affinity with Oberlin,” the underground railroad station and site of the college to which Denver is heading at the end of *Beloved* (*BE* 91). Yet that first novel’s subject is the many-layered, deeply ingrained racist culture of the town in the very years of Morrison’s childhood. Her father maintained a lifelong suspicion of white people, and at least once she witnessed him attacking a white man whom he believed to be a threat to the children, whereas her mother judged every individual on his or her individual merits (*WMM* 6). These conflicting perspectives perhaps explain her acute authorial sensitivity to the complexities and ambiguities of racialized cultural formations and racist attitudes.

Morrison was an outstanding student at school and has been an avid reader for as long as she can remember. She devoured canonical classics from a very young age; she has described books as a “driving thing” in her childhood and has made specific mention of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Jane Austen, and Theodore Dreiser, among others (*DC* 100). She came later to African-American and African literatures, which perhaps affected her all the more because she discovered them late. During her teenage years she worked as a helper at the

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Lorain Public Library, a site of great importance to her, at which, in 1995, she opened the Toni Morrison Reading Room. She also began after-school domestic cleaning work from the age of “around thirteen” (DC 100). At Lorain High School she worked on the school newspaper and yearbook, graduating with honors and with ambitions to become a dancer.³ In her foreword to *Love*, Morrison reflects on the invaluable resources of her childhood – “a feisty mother, a supportive father, and insatiable reading habits” (L xii).

When Morrison went to Howard University in 1949, she was the first member of her family to attend college. She majored in English and minored in Classics, studying with veteran intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance era such as Alain Locke and Sterling Brown. The Classics Department at this time was under the chairmanship of Frank Snowden Jr., whose lifelong scholarly interest was the role of Africans in ancient Greece and Rome. Morrison has, however, frequently remarked on her surprise at and discomfort with the conservative social and racial atmosphere she encountered at Howard. It was “middle class” and “upwardly mobile,” she observed in 1985; when she asked to write a paper on “Black Characters in Shakespeare,” the English Department were “very alarmed (TG 174–5),” and there was a pervasive culture of categorizing students according to the lightness or darkness of their skin. A highlight of her undergraduate years, on the other hand, was her involvement with the theater group, the Howard Players. Touring the Deep South with that group was one of the defining experiences of her life.

The years during which Morrison studied for her master’s degree in English at Cornell – 1953–5 – are ones she has spoken of very little. What we do know is about the thesis she wrote there: entitled “Virginia Woolf’s and William Faulkner’s Treatment of the Alienated,” it discusses the representation of suicide by these authors with whom her own fictional style clearly has much in common, and to whom she is now frequently compared by critics. The thesis is also notable for its interest in the influence of Greek tragedy on Faulkner; in her own novels she went on to engage with those same conventions. When she completed her master’s degree she was still only twenty-four years old. But from 2245 Elyria Avenue, Lorain, Ohio, in 1931 to Graduation Day at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, in 1955 – that must have felt, already, like quite some journey to have made.

1955–1977

After graduating from Cornell, Morrison took the first of the many teaching posts she was to hold: at Texas Southern University. In 1957 she moved back to

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Washington, D.C., and to Howard, this time as a teacher. Although she stayed there until 1964, she felt no less ambivalent about the culture there than she had a decade earlier. “Those were the pre–Civil Rights years,” she explained in 1985, “the years when the measure of excellence was to outstrip the white schools at one thing or another” (DC 32). In 1963 she joined a writing group at Howard, for which she began work on a short story that was to become the foundation of *The Bluest Eye*. Other members of the group included the writer Claude Brown (still a student at that time), the playwright and director Owen Dodson, and the painter Charles Sebree, whom Morrison remembers telling her, after reading her story, “*You are a writer*” (GiA 69).

In 1958, Morrison (or Wofford, as she still was) had married a Jamaican architect, Harold Morrison. Their first son, Harold Ford, was born in 1961, but the marriage was not a happy one. Morrison has spoken little of her ex-husband – “I can’t be honest without causing somebody pain, mostly my children,” she said in 1976 (DC 4) – and they divorced after traveling in Europe together in 1964. Morrison has said she was a “constant nuisance” during her marriage because she was not “subservient” (TG 51); “he knew better about his life but not about mine,” she said in 1992 (DC 72). After parting company from her husband she returned to her family in Lorain, Ohio, where her second son, Slade Kevin, was born. In 1965, against her parents’ wishes, she moved with her young boys to Syracuse, upstate New York, to take a job as a senior editor for the textbook publisher L. W. Singer, which was a subsidiary of Random House. With hindsight Morrison puts a positive gloss on this period of her life, but it was obviously a profoundly challenging one. In 1992, she reflected, “I had to stop and say, let me start again and see what it is like to be a grown up” (DC 72).

During the bleak couple of years Morrison lived in Syracuse, she spent her evenings expanding her story into *The Bluest Eye*. After putting in full days at the office, and when her children were in bed, she “didn’t have anyone to talk to” so she “wrote it as a way to talk” (DC 7). This is also when she developed the habit of getting up to write before dawn, “to use the time before [the children] said “Mama” (DC 64). She states that she wrote the first book “because it wasn’t there”; it was the kind of book she wanted to read, and creating the first novel felt “like a very long, sustained, reading process” (DC 69, 46). After being rejected by numerous publishers, *The Bluest Eye* was published (in a small print run of 2,000 hardback copies) by Holt, Rinehart, Winston in 1970. By this time Morrison was working for Random House in New York City; she had moved there in 1968 to a job in the scholastic division and then became a senior trade editor working for Jason Epstein. Although she made little of her own writing to her editorial colleagues, Robert Gottlieb of Knopf (also

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an imprint of Random House) became her own editor at this time and has worked with her on every novel except *Jazz* and *Paradise* since then.

Morrison lived in Queens during the late 1960s and early 1970s, commuting daily to her Manhattan office, and also teaching in 1971–2 at SUNY Purchase. The picture she paints of this time (particularly in her foreword to *Sula*) is one of financial hardship and childcare difficulties, of a closely knit network of like-minded women friends, of joy in intellectual discovery (of many African authors, for example), of significant achievements in her editorial work, and of political engagement and “daring.” *Sula* was published in 1973, and throughout that decade, in a racial climate that was unreceptive, Morrison’s influence in the publication of black writing was unparalleled. The material she edited and publicized includes the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Leon Forrest, and Gayl Jones; the poetry of Lucille Clifton and June Jordan; and the autobiographies of Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali, and Huey Newton (*B ix*). She also published anthologies of little-known “third world” writing such as *Contemporary African Literature* in 1972 and *Giant Talk* in 1975.⁴

Perhaps the editorial project that has had the most profound influence on Morrison herself was *The Black Book*, published in 1974 with Middleton Harris as its lead editor. This is a documentary history of the African-American experience, consisting of newspaper articles, letters, speeches, photographs, folk songs, and other cultural memorabilia that span three hundred years. In her seminal article on the project, “Rediscovering Black History” (1974), Morrison describes it as “unconventional history told from the point of view of everyday people” and explains the motivation behind it as the attempt to recover some of the values lost through the civil rights movement: “those qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity” (*WMM* 55, 42). As is now well known, it is here that Morrison first encountered the newspaper clipping about Margaret Garner, the historical forerunner to Sethe in *Beloved*. The author has written of the “despair” she felt while compiling the materials (which include two photos of her mother) – “it was like growing up black one more time” – and also of the “joy” (*WMM* 44; 49). In 2009, Random House reissued the book in a 35th Anniversary Edition.

In September 1975, Morrison’s father died. She has described the period following as one of “unimaginable sadness” in which she struggled to accept not only the loss of him but “the loss of the person he thought [she] was” (*SoS ix, x*). In 1977, and frequently since, she has recalled the way he taught her to take pride in her work through the fact that he soldered his name, unseen by anyone else, on every “perfect seam” he welded on ships (*DC* 14). The positive outcome to the “big void” that he left was that she started writing “a book that

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was about men” (WMM 80): the result, published in 1977 and dedicated to “Daddy,” was *Song of Solomon*.

1977–1993

Song of Solomon was Morrison’s first major public success. Soon after its appearance it was chosen as a main selection for the Book-of-the-Month Club; it was the first African-American text to be recognized in this way since Richard Wright’s *Native Son* in 1940. In 1978 it won both the National Book Critics’ Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award. At this time, Morrison found that publishing “became less interesting” to her as her hands-on editorial work diminished, and as the books she had brought out did not sell well (DC 204; TG 133). Devoting more time to her teaching (which now included visiting lectureships at Yale, at Rutgers, and – in 1986 – at Bard), and primarily to her writing, she began to go to the Random House office on only one day a week. She wrote the foreword to the Billops/Dodson/Van der Zee collaboration *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (1978) at this time;⁵ one of the Van der Zee photographs and its backstory became the inspiration for *Jazz* (J ix). In 1988 Morrison reflected that after she wrote *Solomon* she “began to think of [herself] legally as a writer” (DC 46). After that novel’s commercial success, she bought the converted boathouse on the Hudson River, in Rockland County, New York, that has been her principal home ever since.

In 1981 Morrison published her fourth novel, *Tar Baby*. The novel was inspired, she tells us in its foreword, by her grandmother, who “needed her dreams,” and for whom she used to make up stories (TB 14). By now honors were bestowed on an annual basis: this year she was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (who had named her a “distinguished writer” in 1977), and in 1980 she had been appointed to the National Council of the Arts. In 1983 she published (in a collection edited by Amiri and Amina Baraka) her one and only short story, “Recitatif,” but continued to downplay her many activities and achievements. “I really only do two things” she told Nellie McKay in an interview that same year. “All my work has to do with books. I teach books, write books, edit books, or talk about books. ... And the only other thing I do is raise my children” (TG 140). Nevertheless, by the end of 1983 she had resigned from her position at Random House. It was during the ensuing period of newly found freedom that she began work on her fifth and most famous novel: *Beloved*. As she explains, “A few days after my last day at work ... I sat on the porch,

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... looking at giant stones piled up to take the river's occasional fist. ... She walked up out of the water, climbed the rocks, and leaned against the gazebo. Nice hat" (B x–xii).

In 1984, Morrison was named to the Alfred Schweitzer Professorship at SUNY Albany, which she held until 1986. While there she wrote and assisted in the production of the play *Dreaming Emmett*, which was staged in collaboration with the director Gilbert Moses in January 1986 (see Chapter 2, "Other Creative Work"). In its chorus-like collection of ghosts from Emmett Till's past and its preoccupation with revenge, it anticipates the thematic concerns of *Beloved*. And that novel, published in 1987 and winning the Pulitzer in 1988, marks a watershed moment in Morrison's life: it consolidated her success and won her international fame. From that point on, she became a key player on the global cultural stage.

In 1985, Morrison had told Gloria Naylor, "I think ... I won't write anything after *Beloved*" (TG 212). In 1989, when appointed to the Robert Goheen Chair in the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University, she became the first African-American woman to hold an endowed chair at an Ivy League university. Her lecturing and publications continued apace: she delivered the Tanner Lecture at the University of Michigan in 1988 (published as "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 1989), the Massey Lectures at Harvard in 1990, and the Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, in the same year. Both the Harvard and Cambridge lectures were to become the groundbreaking work of literary criticism *Playing in the Dark*, published in 1992. In the same year Morrison published her sixth novel, *Jazz*, which she has often cited as her own favorite, and which became a *New York Times* best seller. She also formalized her role as a social commentator, editing the essay collection *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power* (1992).

Speaking about her writing habits in a 1992 interview, Morrison said, "I always get up and make a cup of coffee while it is still dark ... and then I drink the coffee and watch the light come. ... This ritual comprises my preparation to enter a space that I can only call non-secular" (DC 65). Such a routine was presumably a necessity given the achievements and demands of this period in her life, but its symbolism also sets a spiritual tenor that Morrison herself was to continue. On 7 October 1993 she was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. According to the *Washington Post*, on that day she had unplugged the phone by 10:00 am and taught her Princeton class as normal. At the award ceremony in Stockholm, in December of the same year, after delivering her fabulous lecture, she closed her acceptance speech by asking us to share with her "a moment of grace" (NL 33).

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Just weeks after the Nobel award ceremony, Morrison's home on the Hudson River burned down. The fire broke out on the morning of Christmas Day, in 1993, and in September 1994 the author revealed to a *New York Times* interviewer that she might “not ever, ever, ever get over” the loss of her “photographs, ... children's report cards [and] manuscripts,” as well as treasured first editions of Emily Dickinson, William Faulkner, and a second edition of Frederick Douglass published in England (DC 103; 153). Two months later, Morrison's mother died. The author refused to perceive these “very serious devastations” as a manifestation of the so-called curse of the Nobel, however, preferring to identify the prize as the distinguishing positive event of this time (DC 103). In 1994 she founded a new performing arts seminar program, the Princeton Atelier, and at this time she herself was writing lyrics for works by the composers André Previn, Richard Danielpour, Max Roach, and Judith Weir, many of which were performed at Carnegie Hall. Meanwhile her teaching at Princeton centered on her twelve-lecture course American Africanism, which she taught for six years, along with Creative Writing.

In 1998, Morrison co-edited (with Claudia Brodsky Lacour) a collection of essays on the O. J. Simpson case entitled *Birth of A Nation'hood*. In her now-established role as a public intellectual or spokesperson for the Left, in the *New Yorker* she criticized the “raw comedy spiked with Cotton Mather homilies” that characterized the pursuit of President Clinton in 1998 (WMM 152) and helped to organize an intellectuals' protest against his impeachment; was scathing in interviews some years later about the Bush administration's response to the Al-Qaeda attacks, and gave speeches at Howard and Princeton on the future of university education.

In 1998 Morrison published her seventh novel, *Paradise*, which completed the trilogy beginning with *Beloved* and *Jazz*. Between 2002 and 2003 she published (together with her son Slade) the three children's books in the *Who's Got Game?* series, a graphic-text-style revision of Aesop; and in 2003 she published her eighth novel, *Love*. Throughout this period she maintained an intense schedule of international book tours (speaking at the Oxford Union about *Paradise* in May 1998, for example), public readings, and media appearances. She has always been willing to engage with her readership, both general and scholarly, and is profoundly invested in the reception of her work. She has, for example, regularly attended the conferences of the Toni Morrison Society, which was founded by Carolyn Denard in 1993.⁶ At these events in Lorain, Ohio, in 2000; in Washington, D.C., in 2003; and in Cincinnati in 2005

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(which included the state premiere of the opera *Margaret Garner*, for which she had written the libretto), she both gave formal presentations and participated informally in scholarly panels. At the Paris conference in 2010, besides her scheduled appearances, she sat in for several hours on the roundtable discussion about the teaching of her work.

Honors and tributes, both formal and informal, have accumulated rapidly since 1993 and the Nobel. In 1996 she was awarded the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters; *The Dancing Mind* was her acceptance speech in November of that year. She received an honorary doctoral degree from the École Normale Supérieure in 2003; in 2005 from the University of Oxford; and in 2006 from the Sorbonne. At the same time, Oprah Winfrey's nomination of four Morrison novels for her book club – *Solomon* in 1996, *Paradise* in 1998, *The Bluest Eye* in 2000, and *Sula* in 2002 – had a major impact on the author's popularity and sales. Her seventieth birthday in 2001, and her seventy-fifth in 2006, were marked by celebrations at the New York Public Library and at the Lincoln Center, respectively.

In June 2006 Morrison transferred her professorial status at Princeton to emerita, but in no sense of the word did she “retire” from the world of work. She spent the period from October of that year to January 2007 as guest curator at the Musée du Louvre in Paris, where she organized a series of events and curatorial processes that centered on the theme “Étranger Chez Soi,” or “The Foreigner's Home,” while in March 2007, back in New York, she curated the “Art Is Otherwise” event at the Baryshnikov Arts Center. With hindsight, the year 2008 reads as one in which Morrison's literary endeavors and political goals (a distinction she herself would never contemplate) complemented and fulfilled each other in striking ways. In January of that year, she wrote a public letter endorsing Barack Obama, who was competing against Hillary Clinton in the primaries. In July, Morrison attended the Toni Morrison Society Conference in Charleston, South Carolina, which included the ceremonial placing of a memorial “Bench by the Road” on Sullivan's Island.⁷ Her ninth novel, *A Mercy*, was published in November of 2008, just days after the election of Obama to the presidency.

In 2009 Morrison edited the PEN anti-censorship collection *Burn this Book*, to which she also contributed the introductory essay. On the opening day of the Toni Morrison Society Conference in Paris (4 November 2010), Morrison was presented with France's Legion d'Honneur. The next day she presided at the placing of another “bench by the road,” and on the last day she read the opening passage from her then-unfinished novel, *Home* (May 2012), although she did not reveal its title as such until her reading (following the placing of a further bench) at George Washington University in September 2011. Just a