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978-1-107-00391-0 - The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison
Tessa Roynon
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The Cambridge Introduction to
Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison has written some of the most significant and demanding fiction of the modern age. Her dazzling depictions of African-American experience are studied in high schools and colleges, debated in the media, and analyzed by scholars at an astounding rate. This Introduction offers readers a guide to the world of Morrison in all its complexity, from her status as a key player on the global intellectual stage to her unique perspective on American history and her innovative narrative techniques. Covering every novel from *The Bluest Eye* to *A Mercy*, Tessa Roynon combines close readings with critical insights into Morrison's other creative work, such as short stories, libretto and song lyrics, and unpublished pieces for performance. Chapters also highlight the significance of Morrison's nonfiction, including her groundbreaking work of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark*, as well as her many essays, speeches, and interviews. Lively and accessibly written, Roynon's insightful text is ideal for readers approaching Morrison for the first time as well as those familiar with her work.

Tessa Roynon teaches American literature at the University of Oxford. Author of *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition: Transforming American Culture* (2013) and co-editor of *African Athena: New Agendas* (2011), she has published articles on Morrison widely, including in the *Journal of American Studies* and *African American Review*.

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TESSA ROYNON

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For my parents, Gavin and Patsy Roynon, with grateful love

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Preface

In July 2008 I went to Charleston, South Carolina, for the conference of the Toni Morrison Society. The driver of my taxi from the airport erupted in enthusiasm when she heard where I was going. When she found out the program was to include Morrison reading from her not-yet-published novel *A Mercy*, she told me she would find a way to be in that theater herself. It is to state the obvious to say that not every Nobel Prize–winning author of complex, difficult novels, not every university professor who has produced critical work of broad and enduring intellectual significance, is held in this kind of esteem. There is something different about Toni Morrison.

Author of ten novels to date, Morrison has been translated into twenty-six languages. She has been a *Newsweek* cover; she is an institution on "Oprah's Book Club"; and she has honorary doctorates from the universities of Oxford and the Sorbonne. Her unique, challenging, and passionately political depictions of African-American experience are studied in high schools and colleges, discussed by reading groups and debated in all media, and published on by scholars at an astounding rate.

So much material and so much hype mean that to approach the world of Morrison for the first time is a little overwhelming. The aim of this book is to provide one way into and one path through that world. You will find here an overview of her life story, which emphasizes the experiences that have shaped her intellectually and politically. You will find detailed introductions to the first nine novels (*Home*, published in May 2012, postdates the submission of this manuscript), as well as consideration of her other creative work and nonfiction. There follows a discussion of the main contexts within which Morrison's oeuvre operates: African-American history and tradition, dominant American culture, African traditions, and transnational culture. The fourth and final chapter addresses the reception of Morrison's work: an overview of the critical field is followed by a brief discussion of her evolving status and reputation as a cultural icon. A Guide to Further Reading is at the end.

It is a great privilege to write this book, but it is also a responsibility. Morrison is a writer of such sophistication and moral seriousness that to distill

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the richness of her work into an introductory overview is no small challenge. The scholars, teachers, students, friends, and family who have contributed to my journey this far are too numerous to name individually, but I am indebted to all of them. To those of you just setting out on a study of this demanding but rewarding author, meanwhile, my advice repeats the words with which Florens begins the story of her journey in *A Mercy*: "Don't be afraid."

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Abbreviations

Quotations will be cited in parentheses in the text by page number.

AM	*A Mercy* (2008) New York: Vintage, 2009.
B	*Beloved* (1987) New York: Vintage, 2005.
BB	*The Black Book.* Ed. Middleton Harris et al. (1974). 35th Anniversary Edition. New York: Random House, 2009.
BE	*The Bluest Eye* (1970) New York: Vintage, 1999.
BoN	*Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O. J. Simpson Case*. With Claudia Brodsky Lacour. New York: Pantheon, 1993.
BTB	*Burn This Book: PEN Writers Speak Out on the Power of the Word.* New York: Harper, 2009.
CL	"City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction." *Literature and the American Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature.* Ed. Michael C. Jayne and Ann Chalmers Watts. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981. 35–44.
DC	*Toni Morrison: Conversations*. Ed. Carolyn Denard. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008.
GiA	"Ghosts in the Attic." Hilton Als. *New Yorker* 27 Oct. 2003: 62–75.
H	"Home." *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, US Terrain.* Ed. Wahneema Lubiano. New York: Pantheon, 1997, 3–12.
J	*Jazz* (1992) New York: Vintage, 2005.
L	*Love* (2003) New York: Vintage, 2005.
NL	*Lecture and Speech of Acceptance, Upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, 1993.* New York: Knopf, 1994.
P	*Paradise* (1998) New York: Vintage, 1999.
PiD	*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.* 1992; London: Picador, 1993.

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R	"Recitatif." *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women*. Ed. Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka. New York: Morrow, 1983. 243–66.
RJEP	*Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Pantheon, 1992.
S	*Sula* (1973) New York: Vintage, 2005.
SoS	*Song of Solomon* (1977) New York: Vintage, 2005.
TB	*Tar Baby* (1981) New York: Vintage, 2004.
TG	Taylor-Guthrie, Danille, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
UTU	"Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review 28* (1989): 1–34.
WMM	*What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*. Ed. Carolyn Denard. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008.

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