

An inspired Life

Toni Morrison writes and a generation listens

By Dana Micucci

NEW YORK—"It's always the same sort of compulsion and delight," says novelist Toni Morrison of her writing. Her voice is soft and lulling, punctuated frequently by an exuberant laugh that hints of a warm and ready generosity. Morrison, 61, hailed by critics as one of the most important African-American female writers of our generation who has become a voice for a culture, has just published her sixth novel, "Jazz" (Knopf, \$21). Her first book since winning the Pulitzer Prize for "Beloved" in 1988, "Jazz" tells the story of a love triangle while evoking the pulsating tempo of Harlem in the 1920s.

"I wanted to show how ordinary people lived and viewed that period in history," Morrison says.

"Jazz itself is one of the most vital artistic forms in the world. It symbolizes an incredible kind of improvisation, a freedom in which a great deal of risk is involved."

Her parents' stories about the 1920s of their youth partly inspired "Jazz," says Morrison, who recalls the "gleaming terms of excitement and attraction" they used to describe that era.

"Everything is grist for the writer's



Photo by James Keyser

Author Toni Morrison: "My father always took it for granted that I could do anything, and my mother and grandmother never entertained fragility or vulnerability"

mill," she says. Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford to parents who had migrated from Georgia and Alabama and settled in Lorain, Ohio, just west of Cleveland. She is the second-oldest of four children. Her late father, George Wofford, worked in a steel mill. Her mother, Ramah Willis, who still lives in Lorain, sang jazz and opera. "We played music in the house all the time," says Morrison, who describes her family as "joyful, high-spirited people" whose storytelling tradition influenced her writing.

"People talked more back then and had a tendency to recount their lives in large 'narrative gestures," she says. "It was a

form of entertainment."

Morrison recalls being "utterly devoted" to her father and vying for his attention with her older sister. (Morrison also has two younger brothers.)

"Being in the second-girl position is about as anonymous as you can get," she says. "I felt I had no pride of place. I started reading when I was 4 and read all the time. I found comfort and solace in other people's narratives."

But she is also a product of her parents' strong-willed characters, Morrison says. "They could always do something about a difficult situation," she says. "They never tucked tail. I felt much endowed by their te-

nacity. My father always took it for granted that I could do anything, and my mother and grandmother never entertained fragility or vulnerability.

"After all, look what we did," they'd say about their escape from life-threatening situations in the racially tense South."

She recalled hearing stories about "white boys" threatening her grandmother's family on her farm in Greenville, Ala. Morrison, who says she never set out to be a writer but always wanted to teach, graduated from Howard University in Washington, in 1953 with a degree in English literature and classics.

The first woman in her family to attend college, she earned her master's degree in English at Cornell University two years later and went on to teach English at Texas Southern University in 1956 and 1957. While teaching at Howard University from 1958 to 1963, she began writing.

At the time she was a member of an informal writing group, for which she wrote a "little story" that in 1970 became her first novel, "The Bluest Eye," an account of racial tensions in Lorain, Ohio.

"Writing was something I did privately at night like women with families who use their off hours for creative projects," Morrison says. "I didn't call myself a writer. I just did it to pass the time, and I enjoyed it."

"But once I began 'The Bluest Eye' it was such an energizing experience. I felt bored with what was out there. Suddenly I wanted to move from what other people thought and imagined to what I thought and imagined."

It wasn't as effortless as it sounds, however. In 1963, Morrison separated from and eventually divorced her husband, an architect she had met in Washington. (Morrison is guarded about her personal life and refuses to discuss the marriage further. She only will say that she raised two sons, Ford, now 30, and Slade, now 26, on her own.)

“It was a little bleak at that time,” she says. “My back was up against the wall, and I didn’t want the easy route, which was to live at home with my family or to be in another dependent situation. I wanted to find out who I was and whether I was tough enough.”

After Morrison left her teaching post at Howard, she worked as a textbook editor at L.W. Singer, a division of Random House Publishers in Syracuse, N.Y., for two years. She then moved to New York and continued as an editor for Random House for the next 20 years.

She also managed to teach English on Fridays at Rutgers and Yale Universities until she was offered the Albert E. Schweitzer humanities chair at the State University of New York in Albany. She held that post from 1984 to 1989, when she moved to Princeton University, where she is Robert F. Goheen professor, Council of the Humanities.

“I was partly drawn to teaching because I didn’t know what to do with a master’s in English,” Morrison says. “Once I Got into it, I really enjoyed it. Now my students ask me how they can become writers, and I tell them to go out and get a [paying] job!”

Throughout her teaching and editing careers, Morrison says she found the time and courage to continue writing. After some favorable reviews and modest sales for her first book, Morrison’s second novel, “Sula,” which is about friendship between women, was published in 1974 to much critical acclaim. Then followed “Song of Solomon,” winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977; “Tar Baby;” and “Beloved,” which was based on an 1850s newspaper account of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who Killed her 2-year-old daughter to save her from slavery.

Morrison downplays the Pulitzer Prize she won for “Beloved,” saying she was surprised and flattered but that it didn’t alter her life significantly.

Her motivation to write is more personal, she says. All of her novels pose questions, says Morrison, who has become known for exploring issues of gender and race in ways few others have successfully attempted.

“I’m interested in how men are educated, how women relate to each other, how we are able to love, how we balance political and personal forces, who survives in certain situations and who doesn’t and, specifically, how these and other universal issues relate to African Americans,” she says. “The search for love and identity runs through most everything I write.”

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Writing is the place where she can be courageous, says Morrison, where she can “think the unthinkable.”

“It’s an exploration of the possibilities of self and being human in the world, and it allows me to stretch and grow deeper. I always wanted to have some teeth in my work.”

She had planned to stop writing after her fourth book, but something kept pushing her, she says.

“Every now and then some incredibly compelling idea comes up and poses itself as a question. Then I find myself formulat-

ing characters who can work out answers to the questions.”

In lyrical, rhythmic prose, “Jazz” tells the story of Joe Trace, a middle-aged door-to-door cosmetics salesman; his wife, Violet, a beautician; and Joe’s 18-year-old lover, Dorcas—a love triangle with a tragic end that serves as a starting point for Morrison’s exploration of her characters’ sorrows, secrets and violent pasts.

Expressing Violet’s rage at her husband’s adultery, Morrison writes: “... her hand, the one that wasn’t holding the glass shaped like a flower, was under the table drumming out the rhythm on the inside of his thigh; his thigh, his thigh, thigh, thigh, and he bought her underwear with stitching done to look like rosebuds and violets, VIOLETS, don’t you know, and she wore it for him thin as it was ... while I was where? Sliding on ice trying to get to somebody’s kitchen to do their hair?”

Morrison hardly seems ready to lay down her pen, having just published, in addition to “Jazz,” a collection of critical essays. “Playing in the Dark” (Harvard University Press, \$14.95) is an inquiry into the significance of African-Americans in American literature and the imaginative ways in which white writers appropriated the lives and language of blacks.

“Black characters were used to represent endless love, like Jim in ‘Huckleberry Finn,’ for example,” Morrison says. “The response of writers like Twain, Melville, Faulkner and Hawthorne toward blacks hadn’t been recognized by critics in a formal study,” she says.

Morrison, who has become a role model for African-American women and women in general, views that responsibility with seriousness and humility.

“My rank in terms of writing is of no interest to me. The truth is that you have to face blank paper, and labels don’t help you much.

“I am happy if I can serve as an inspiration to others and to women who want to write. But it’s not right for people to transfer their own internal responsibilities to a role model.

“My job is to be a morally responsible human being. And that’s a private struggle.”

Morrison’s public struggles, however, have been similar to those faced by all women, she says.

“Whether it was in the university or the corporation, there was always that sense of dismissal, easy contempt and patronage. There’s always a barrier to break down. Each profession has a territory reserved for women that one woman will eventually challenge.”

As a single mother trying to keep career and family intact, she admits to having made “a lot of mistakes.”

“It was very difficult writing and rearing children because they deserve all your time, and you don’t have it,” says Morrison, who has not remarried. “It’s easy to overestimate and underestimate your ability to do both. I regret having had to work alone and raise children. But the other choices were unacceptable to me. I had to see if it was possible to be on my own.”

One thing she doesn’t regret was “putting writing at the center” of her life. “You just shift priorities. And if you want to do it badly enough you’ll find the time. You’ll be so eager to get to it that it won’t be a burden. Women shouldn’t wait for someone to give them permission to write.” ■