*Say's reading materials for Group B*

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# The Magnitude of Toni Morrison

*The literary titan, who died yesterday at age 88, wrote black characters with a rare compassion that ripples far beyond her own work*

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This morning, the publishing house Alfred A. Knopf announced that the celebrated writer Toni Morrison had died in New York at the age of 88 following a short illness. Of her inimitable legacy, the Morrison family issued a short statement, which read in part, "The consummate writer who treasured the written word, whether her own, her students or others, she read voraciously and was most at home when writing."

Indeed, the literary titan born Chloe Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, was a paragon of scholarly dedication: She famously wrote her first novels on her cramped New York City subway commutes, while raising two sons. ("I've written on scraps of paper, in hotels on hotel stationery, in automobiles," she once said. "If it arrives you know. If you know it really has come, then you have to put it down.") She recorded her own audiobooks, because she alone knew how the words ought to sound. She wrote sentences as James Baldwin would later exhort writers to do: clean as a bone.

One of Morrison's greatest contributions to literature was the kaleidoscopic vision with which she saw black people—and the rigorous compassion with which she wrote black characters. Even now, 46 years after the publication of her first novel, The Bluest Eye, this perspective remains a rarity in publishing and in pop culture more broadly. Morrison's characters, like The Bluest Eye's young Pecola Breedlove, pulse with a

formidable wanting. They yearn for a different world; they pine for one another. They live in Harlem and in fictional midwestern towns, on slave ships and near resorts. Both despite and because of the specificity of their settings, her characters evince fears and desires and pain that then consume the reader. Morrison's world extends far beyond her pages; it embeds itself in those who witness it.

The thrill and difficulty of reading Toni Morrison lie in the turmoil of her characters' interiority and the often-deceptive simplicity with which she renders it. Morrison's marriage of these duelling literary interests has long been a superlative achievement. That she applied it to black characters in America remains a staggering socio-political accomplishment, too. Through her novels, which unmoor the reader thematically and rhetorically, Morrison posed weighty questions: How might a child too young to cross the street unattended have already learned to hate the very eyes with which she sees the world around her? What atrocity could drive a woman to sacrifice her own offspring rather than submit the child to it? What interpersonal gulfs are too massive for even love to bridge?

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These urgent queries were made all the more compelling by Morrison's decision to write within the rich domain of black experiences. Though her

novels were sprawling and followed characters across multiple centuries and states, many interviewers asked Morrison why she wrote chiefly about black people. Her answers were slippery and revealing: In noting that white people have never been central to her work, Morrison placed herself in the lineage of writers like the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, whose Things Fall Apart has become a foundational text in the loose category of African literature. She also resisted the view that distinctly American categories of race ought to constrain her storytelling. "I'm writing for black people," she told The Guardian in 2015, "in the same way that Tolstoy was not writing for me, a 14-year-old colored girl from Lorain, Ohio. I don't have to apologize or consider myself limited because I don't [write about white people]—which is not absolutely true, there are lots of white people in my books. The point is not having the white critic sit on your shoulder and approve it."

By its very existence, Morrison's work expanded the literary canon and the imaginations of the authors—black and otherwise—who followed her. There is no Jesmyn Ward or Tayari Jones without Morrison, no Colson Whitehead or Teju Cole, no Paul Beatty or Jacqueline Woodson. After the publication of Morrison's final collection, The Source of Self-Regard, the Zambian author Namwali Serpell nodded to the writer's aspirational imperiousness, itself a quality of Morrison's that created space for others like her: "I've seen people spurn Morrison as obvious or undeserving, as if so much praise surely begs the question. I'm always struck by this contradiction at the core of her reputation," Serpell wrote in a March essay for Slate. "My British grandmother once called Beloved both 'perplexing' and 'a potboiler.' Morrison incenses people. How dare she be difficult and a black woman?"

Morrison was never guarded for the sake of causing senseless discomfort. The protection of self, and of community, was for her an act of care. Ever the steward of talent and narrative possibility, Morrison also broadened the provincial domain of American literature through the work she fostered as the first black woman editor at Random House (a post she held even before publishing her first novel at 39). During her tenure, Random House acquired titles from authors such as the novelists Gayl Jones and

Toni Cade Bambara, the poet Henry Dumas, the legendary boxer Muhammad Ali, and the Black Panther Party activists Angela Davis and Huey P. Newton.

Morrison didn't just seek black authors to fill her publishing ranks; she also nurtured them. It was Morrison who criticized Davis's white biographer for "behaving like Harriet Beecher Stowe, another simpatico white girl who felt she was privy to the secret of how black revolutionaries got that way." It was Morrison who published Dumas's work posthumously and wrote of his death at the hands of police with a pathos that matched the gravity of his poetics. In protecting her writers, Morrison fought for those who would follow and the readers who needed them.

As a critic and an essayist, Morrison applied her sharp analysis to the publishing world she navigated contemporaneously and to American sociopolitical underpinnings writ large. Her clear-eyed vision of the country as it was—and, more important, as it could be—has served as a clarion call to Americans for decades. Often, her words offered an eerie but not unsurprising assessment of what peril awaits should it be ignored. In the lecture she gave when accepting the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature, Morrison presented a view of language that remains frighteningly resonant:

Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek—it must be rejected, altered and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind.

But Morrison's belief in the power of literature—as a social good and as a personal balm—was embedded in all of her writing, even in her most

stringent criticism. Hers is a stunning oeuvre of optimism, a testament to the human capacity for love, connection, and triumph even against unfathomable suffering. Her words, and the ripple effect they created in literature throughout the decades of her career, live on. Unsurprisingly, it is Morrison herself who best captures the work that her death necessitates. In a 2015 essay for The Nation aptly titled “No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear,” she wrote, “I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge—even wisdom. Like art.”