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Obituaries

Toni Morrison, Nobel laureate who transfigured American literature, dies at 88

By Emily Langer
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Toni Morrison, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist who conjured a black girl longing for blue eyes, a slave mother who kills her child to save her from bondage and other indelible characters who helped transfigure a literary canon long closed to African Americans, died Aug. 5 at a hospital in the Bronx. She was 88.

Paul Bogaards, a spokesman for the publishing company Alfred A. Knopf, announced the death and said the cause was complications from pneumonia.

Ms. Morrison spent an impoverished childhood in Ohio steel country, began writing during what she described as stolen time as a single mother and became the first black woman to receive the Nobel Prize in literature. Critically acclaimed and widely loved, she received recognitions as diverse as the Pulitzer Prize and the selection of her novels — four of them — for the book club led by talk-show host Oprah Winfrey.

Ms. Morrison placed African Americans, particularly women, at the heart of her writing at a time when they were largely relegated to the margins both in literature and in life. With language celebrated for its lyricism, she was credited with conveying as powerfully, or more than perhaps any novelist before her, the nature of black life in America, from slavery to the inequality that went on more than a century after it ended.

Among her best-known works was "Beloved" (1987), the Pulitzer-winning novel later made into a film starring Winfrey. It introduced millions of readers to Sethe, a slave mother haunted by the memory of the child she had murdered, having judged life in slavery worse than no life at all. Like many of Ms. Morrison's characters, she was tortured, yet noble — "unavailable to pity," as the author described them.

"The Bluest Eye" (1970), Ms. Morrison's debut novel, was published as she approached her 40th birthday, and it became an enduring classic. It centered on Pecola Breedlove, a poor black girl of 11 who is disconsolate at what she perceives as her ugliness. Ms. Morrison said that she wrote the book because she had encountered no other one like it — a story that delved into the life of a child so infected by racism that she had come to loathe herself.

“She had seen this little girl all of her life,” reads a description of Pecola. “Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. They had stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything. Unblinking and unabashed, they stared up at her. The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between.”

Ms. Morrison’s Nobel Prize, bestowed in 1993, made her the first native-born American since John Steinbeck in 1962 to receive that honor. The citation recognized her for “novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import” and that breathed life into “an essential aspect of American reality.”

Ms. Morrison was “an African American woman giving voice to essentially silent stories,” Elizabeth Beaulieu, the editor of “The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia,” said in an interview. “She is writing the African American story for American history.”

Beyond her own literature, Ms. Morrison was credited with giving voice to black stories through her work as a Random House editor beginning in the late 1960s. There was a “terrible price to pay,” she once remarked, for leaving the comfortable familiarity of Lorain, the Ohio town where she had grown up, for a career in an unwelcoming white society.

But she wanted to participate in the creation of a “canon of black work,” she said. While raising two sons, and while pursuing her own writing in the hours before dawn, she shepherded into print works including autobiographies of boxer Muhammad Ali and political activist Angela Davis.

“There are writers that we would not know had she not been in that very crucial position as a black woman in publishing,” Angelyn L. Mitchell, a professor of English and African American studies at Georgetown University, said in an interview.

Ms. Morrison also helped anthologize the writings of African authors including Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. She oversaw the publication of “The Black Book” (1974), a best-selling documentation of black life in America that included advertisements for the sale of slaves, photographs of lynchings, and images of churches and other spiritual places that had helped sustain black communities.

In addition to professorial duties at Yale and Princeton universities, Ms. Morrison was an essayist and lecturer, weighing in with withering force on race and its role in the events of her times.

One of her most provocative public commentaries came during what she saw as the persecution of President Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. In a polarizing New Yorker magazine essay, she observed that Clinton, his “white skin notwithstanding,” was “our first black President.”

“Blacker than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children’s lifetime,” Ms. Morrison wrote in that article, published in 1998, a decade before Barack Obama, the son of a Kenyan father and a white American mother, occupied the White House. “After all, Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald’s-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas.”

At the end of her life, her dreadlocks by then streaked with gray, Ms. Morrison often appeared to fill the role of a sage elder. In 2012, President Obama awarded her the nation’s highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, recognizing her for “her nursing of souls and strengthening the character of our union.”

Obama described her as “one of our nation’s most distinguished storytellers,” a judgment that was nearly unanimous among literary critics. They tussled, however, over whether Ms. Morrison was best described as an African American writer, an African American female writer or simply an American writer — and whether the label mattered at all.

“I can accept the labels,” Ms. Morrison told the New Yorker in 2003, “because being a black woman writer is not a shallow place but a rich place to write from. It doesn’t limit my imagination; it expands it. It’s richer than being a white male writer because I know more and I’ve experienced more.”

A granddaughter of a slave

Ms. Morrison, one of four children, was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, on Feb. 18, 1931. Her parents, George Wofford and the former Ramah Willis, were transplanted Southerners. A grandfather had been born into slavery.

Ms. Morrison’s father held various jobs, including working as a car washer, a steel welder and a construction worker, and the family moved frequently.

Her mother was hopeful about the future of race relations, but her father, she wrote in a 1976 essay in the New York Times, distrusted "every word and every gesture of every white man on earth." Once, she recalled, he threw a white man down the steps and then tossed a tricycle toward him, believing that the man intended to molest his daughters.

"I think my father was wrong," Ms. Morrison wrote in the Times, "but considering what I have seen since, it may have been very healthy for me to have witnessed that as my first black-white encounter."

At 12, Ms. Morrison made the personal step of converting to Catholicism, the faith followed by a branch of her extended family, and took Anthony as her baptismal name. For short, she became Toni.

As a writer, Ms. Morrison would draw on her experiences as a child. Once, she and another black child discussed whether there was a god. "I said there was," Ms. Morrison told the New Yorker, "and she said there wasn't and she had proof: she had prayed for, and not been given, blue eyes."

She enrolled in Howard University in Washington, receiving a bachelor's degree in English in 1953 and, two years later, a master's degree in English from Cornell University. She soon joined the Howard faculty, where her students included the civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael.

While at Howard, she married a Jamaican architect, Harold Morrison. They had two sons, but their marriage was an unhappy one, in part, she told the Times, because "women in Jamaica are very subservient in their marriages."

"I was a constant nuisance to mine," she said.

In her unhappiness, she sought escape through writing. One early story was about a black girl who longed to have blue eyes.

After divorcing, Ms. Morrison moved with her sons to Syracuse, N.Y., where she became a textbook editor before joining the Random House headquarters in New York. She said that, as an editor, she avoided the simultaneous release of books by multiple black authors so that reviewers, who seemed to regard works by African Americans as all of a piece, would not be enticed to dump them into a single review.

Later, as an author, she encountered some of the same prejudices.

“I was reading some essay about the ‘Black Family,’ ” she once recalled, “and the writer went into a comparison between one of my novels and ‘The Cosby Show.’ ” The analogy, she told Time magazine, was “like comparing apples and Buicks.”

'A time when black wasn't beautiful'

Ms. Morrison rewrote her old short story as the novel “The Bluest Eye” in part, she said, to counter the prevailing credo of the time, “Black is beautiful.”

“When people said at that time black is beautiful — yeah? Of course,” she told the Guardian. “Who said it wasn’t? So I was trying to say . . . wait a minute. Guys. There was a time when black wasn’t beautiful. And you hurt.”

In that book, Pecola is raped by her father, Cholly Breedlove. But even that event is complex, the result of the father’s lifetime spent in oppression.

“Miss Morrison exposes the negative of the Dick-and-Jane-and-Mother-and-Father-and-Dog-and-Cat photograph that appears in our reading primers, and she does it with a prose so precise, so faithful to speech and so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry,” Times book reviewer John Leonard wrote in 1970.

Ms. Morrison’s next book was “Sula” (1973), about two women from a black community called the Bottom who diverge in their decades-long friendship. In that work and others, Ms. Morrison said she tried to capture black sisterhood.

It was “so critical among black women because there wasn’t anybody else,” she once told the publication Poets and Writers. “We saved one another’s lives for generations. When I was writing ‘Sula,’ I was talking about a relationship that fell apart, because I wanted the reader to miss it.”

Ms. Morrison ventured into the experience of black men in “Song of Solomon” (1977), a family epic centered on Macon Dead, known as Milkman, who searches for his identity through his family lineage. Widely acclaimed, the novel, with its far-reaching story line, was compared with Gabriel García Márquez’s “One Hundred Years of Solitude.”

After “Song of Solomon” came “Tar Baby” (1981), set on a Caribbean island, and then “Beloved.” The novel was inspired by the story of a real runaway slave, Margaret Garner, who was caught as she escaped from Kentucky to freedom in Ohio in the 1850s and slit the throat of her 3-year-old daughter before being returned to her master.

“I wanted to translate the historical into the personal,” Ms. Morrison told the Paris Review. “I spent a long time trying to figure out what it was about slavery that made it so repugnant, so personal, so indifferent, so intimate, and yet so public.”

The intensity of her books at times attracted criticism, and no work more than "Beloved." Stanley Crouch, the cultural critic, called the work a "blackface holocaust novel." He described Ms. Morrison as "immensely talented" but remarked, according to Time magazine, that she would benefit from "a new subject matter, the world she lives in, not this world of endless black victims."

Outside such criticism, however, "Beloved" was praised as one of the most significant works of the century.

"If she wrote only 'Beloved,' that would have been enough," said Mitchell, of Georgetown, "because in that she is able to take her readers to a moment in American history that is unthinkable."

In 1988, 48 black writers — among them Maya Angelou, Alice Walker and Ernest J. Gaines — placed an open letter in the Times protesting the fact that Ms. Morrison had not yet received the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize. That year, the Pulitzer went to "Beloved."

Henry Louis Gates Jr., the Harvard University historian, remarked that she won the Nobel primarily for "Beloved" and her novel "Jazz" (1992), set in Harlem in the 1920s, whose voice he described as "combining Ellington, Faulkner and Maria Callas."

Ms. Morrison's later novels included "Paradise" (1997), set in an all-black town in the Western United States; "Love" (2003), about the many lives affected by a deceased hotel owner; "A Mercy" (2008), an exploration of early American slavery; "Home" (2012), a portrait of a returning Korean War veteran; and "God Help the Child" (2015), the story of a black woman rejected because of the darkness of her skin, and the far-reaching effects of childhood pain.

Other works by Ms. Morrison included a play, "Dreaming Emmett," written in the 1980s about the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till. She wrote the libretto for an opera, "Margaret Garner," composed by Richard Danielpour, about the slave who inspired "Beloved," and co-wrote children's books with her son Slade Morrison, who died of pancreatic cancer in 2010.

Survivors include her son Harold Ford Morrison of Princeton, N.J.; and three grandchildren.

For all the exploration of race in Ms. Morrison's works, one of her most enduring messages was delivered through its absence. In "Paradise," Ms. Morrison forced readers to guess which character was the white woman whose murder is foretold in the book's first words.

"I did that on purpose," Ms. Morrison told Time. "I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until those readers understood that their race didn't matter. I want to dissuade people from reading literature in that way."

She continued: "Race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It's real information, but it tells you next to nothing."

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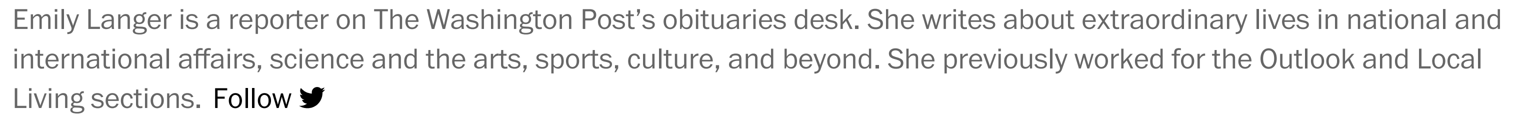
Emily Langer



Emily Langer is a reporter on The Washington Post’s obituaries desk. She writes about extraordinary lives in national and international affairs, science and the arts, sports, culture, and beyond. She previously worked for the Outlook and Local Living sections. Follow