



“ So Madonna showed us her nipple. Was that supposed to be radical? ”

Toni Morrison believes that divorce is good for you, that Viagra should be banned, and that reality TV shows are little more than modern-day ‘lynchings’. And when she talks, presidents listen. By Ariel Leve

INTERVIEW

There is nothing about Toni Morrison that isn’t distinctive. The way she thinks, the rhythm of her speech, her appearance, even her laughter. It’s robust and full and she embraces it with unselfconscious abandon. Her voice, in life and in her work, is epic.

“Where is she?” I hear it call out. We are meeting in a private room off the lobby in an apartment building. She is getting ready to leave for her house on the river – 25 miles north in upstate New York.

In photographs, Morrison has an intense stare and a severe presence. But in person, she seems relaxed and gentle, though no less commanding. She is wearing a paisley headscarf that covers her grey dreadlocks and around her neck on a gold chain that hangs down over a long black dress there is a small heart carved out of butterstone. The pendant sits close to her own heart and she touches it often as we speak. Later, she will tell me that the stone has a special meaning – and a connection to the death of her son, Slade, who died 19 months ago at the age of 45.

One of America’s greatest living novelists, a Nobel laureate who was awarded the prize in 1993, she has earned her place as a literary icon (one human enough to celebrate her Nobel win by dancing around her office). She sits now, like a regal lioness, feet firmly planted on the marble floor in girly turquoise bejewelled flats, looking me in the eye the entire time we speak.

Before the awards, the recognition, the legions of fans and students, Toni Morrison was born Chloe Wofford. As far as she’s concerned, that is still her real name. “Morrison” is the last name of her ex-husband and “Toni” was a nickname from adolescence – derived from Saint Anthony.

She still feels like Chloe, but Toni Morrison is who she is to the world.

Morrison has written 10 novels and won a multitude of highly respected awards. Her best-seller *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize and was voted by *The New York Times* the best work of American fiction in the past 25 years. Her 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970, when she was 39 years old and at the time, working at Random House as an editor. Because her literary success came later in life, when did she begin to trust her instincts – was it immediate?

“Oh, I trust something else,” she says, thinking it through. “Which is the intelligence to examine my instincts.” In 1958, Morrison married an architect, Harold Morrison, when they were both studying at Howard University in Washington DC. When they split in 1964, she was pregnant and after their divorce, she was left to care for their two young sons – Harold and Slade. She had by then received her Masters in Literature at Cornell University and became a single,

working mother living in Syracuse (having taken a job editing textbooks at Random House), raising two children on her own. She never remarried. “I don’t think I did any of that very well,” she has said of that time. “I did it ad hoc, like any working mother does.” But not every working mother wakes up every day at four in the morning to write. This is how she wrote *The Bluest Eye* – turning it from a short story she had started five years earlier into a novel. Morrison has never discussed her reasons for leaving her husband but has hinted in the past about how he wished for a more subservient wife. (“He didn’t need me making judgments about him,” she said, “which I did. A lot.”) Today, it’s clear she doesn’t see the divorce as a life-changing event.

“There are women in the world who get divorced and that’s what they do,” she says. “Their conversation is about *it*. He or she didn’t, or I used to, or therefore, and all of their emotions, all of their activity is about that one break-up. Why it happened, what was involved – they never move past it.” She pauses. “It’s a big thing, I guess, but it’s not that big.” Morrison remembers asking friends what they learnt from divorce, and arrives at a trenchant conclusion: “To think of something that we normally think of as failing, as useful information.” In 1967, Morrison’s job transferred her to New York City and she became a senior editor at Random House, editing books by prominent black Americans, including the Black Panthers Huey Newton and Angela Davis, and Muhammad Ali.

She would continue to work there long after finding success with her own novels, while also carrying on with her university teaching. It was often tricky.

“You don’t choose your companions in your workplace,” she explains. “Whether you were, as I was, a teacher or a publisher. I’ve worked for horrible people. I had to work through it. It was an obstacle. There was one really uninformed and stupid boss.” She speaks plaintively, as if she’s suddenly back in the moment and evaluating how to proceed. “This person hates women – all women – and he shows it this way.

“I’d have to see how to make him comfortable. It’s control. I wanted to control it. My job, and I felt very superior doing it, was to not enter into that person’s anger or idiocy.” What characterises so much of Morrison’s work is an absence of sentimentality; it seems as though nothing offends her more than self-pity.

She was halfway through writing her latest novel, *Home*, when her son died, of pancreatic cancer. They had collaborated on several children’s books together. Yet even with personal tragedy, she cannot bear to exist in an indulgent morass for too long. Death, she muses, is usually constructed as loss for the living.

“People speak to me about my son – ‘I’m so sorry for you’ – but no one says, ‘I loved him so much.’ I was busy in grief, ▶



‘HOW TO BE’

President Obama considers himself an ardent Toni Morrison fan, having found inspiration in Morrison’s award-winning novel *‘Song of Solomon’*

which I don't expect to stop. Suddenly realising that the last thing my son would want for me to be very self-involved and narcissistic and self-stroking. It stopped me from writing. Which doesn't mean you stop feeling the absence. It was being willing to think about it in a way that was not self-serving." Morrison was asked about Slade's death on Oprah Winfrey's television show last year, and rejected the idea of getting any kind of "closure" as "some kind of insult".

Unsurprisingly, she prefers to focus on moving forward. "The thing that I do that is life-giving is my work. What I write." Recently, Morrison collaborated with the opera director Peter Sellars on a play that effectively rewrites Shakespeare. It began when Sellars visited her at Princeton University, where she has been a professor since 1989.

"At some point we talked about Desdemona," she says, referring to the character who elopes with Othello to Cyprus, and is eventually murdered by him. "I began to talk about how she had been portrayed like a silly girl who went off with this guy. I said, you know, she was a little different. Think about this girl who ran away from home. In those days, not a small thing. And she was curious. And she liked that he told her these stories of an outside world.

"And also, she goes to war. I mean, she doesn't stay home – she goes with him." Morrison thinks that Desdemona has been misrepresented. Also, the critical preoccupation with the interracial marriage needles her.

"That's all that people talk about! I don't think they cared about that at that time and I don't think Shakespeare cared about it a lot. I know that the performances are about black guy, white girl, he's mean and he kills her. She's the victim. And he's the predator." She sighs. "Black classically trained actors love the role because it's one of the few times that they are the stars. So the same old version gets repeated. And I didn't find justification for that conventional view in *Othello*. I was interested in a different rendering of her." The most important thing in the entire enterprise, she says, has also been central to her in her work as a novelist. And that is, "To take away the gaze of the white male. Once you take that out, the whole world opens up." She smiles. "So I had to get rid of Iago. He was eating up the characters." Morrison's books have been "required reading" in America's academic institutions since the early Seventies. She once said that she began writing her novels to fill the "silences" in literature. They explore race and gender yet feel universal. Her characters are profoundly brave, dented and heroic; they suffer with family, social class, and self-esteem during the most shameful events in American history. In *Beloved*, the central character kills her daughter rather than see her become a slave; in *Sula*, the intensity and bond of a friendship traces the lives of two women who grew up together in a poor Ohio town; and in *The Bluest Eye*, an unflinching look at racism and self-loathing, an 11-year-old black girl prays for blue eyes.

Morrison has spoken in the past about her resistance to explaining black life to a white audience. What did she mean by that?

"In American literature, African American male writers justifiably write books about their oppression," she says. "Confronting the oppressor who is white male or white woman. It's race. And the person who defines you under those circumstances is a white mind – tells you whether you're worthy or what have you. And as long as that's your preoccupation, you're defending yourself against that. Reacting to it. Reacting to the definition – saying it's not true. African American women never do that. They never write about white men. I couldn't care less – I didn't want to spend my energy refuting that gaze."

Morrison is now 81, and has been a public figure for more than half of her life. But her celebrity status was assured when Oprah Winfrey made her one of the early stars of her



'I don't expect the grief to stop. But the last thing my son would want is for me to be narcissistic'

Book Club. Thanks to Winfrey – who also produced and starred in a film of *Beloved* – *The Bluest Eye* sold 800,000 copies 30 years after publication. At one point, Marlon Brando would call and read his favourite part from her novels to her over the phone. But she's also endured more than her fair share of controversy and criticism, most famously from the cranky critic Stanley Crouch, who dismissed *Beloved* as a "blackface Holocaust novel".

Morrison seems largely unimpressed with what counts as controversy today. She admires Lady Gaga as an "art object", but is ambivalent about Madonna. She mentions the singer's recent concert in Istanbul where she flashed the largely Muslim audience. "She had a little tiny bra on and she was onstage.

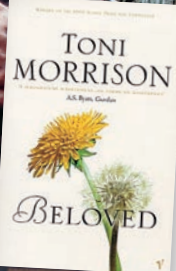
"So she pulled it down and showed her nipple. It was all over the news. I thought," she begins laughing, "What is a nipple? A nipple? It was supposed to be so radical." She is tickled. "If you go to the pygmies – nobody is into nipples. Everyone was screaming – she's so avant-garde or something – it's just a nipple."

Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio, and grew up in a working-class family in a steel town. Her father worked as a welder, her mother sang in the Church choir and Chloe Wofford was the second of four children. Though the family didn't live in the South, the vibrations of racism were still deeply felt and shaped her sensibility. Morrison never intended to become a writer, but she loved to read. Devouring the likes of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Jane Austen from a young age, she excelled in school and went on to Howard University, graduating in 1953 with a degree in English and then going on to Cornell.

Her sister still lives in the town where she was born. An anguished look appears as she mentions the street where they lived. "She told me something about the neighbourhood – she said, 'All that's gone now.' I said, 'What do you mean gone?' She said the whole street was gone; there's nothing but trees." She inhales and puts her hands around her throat – as though to indicate she can't breathe.

"That really hurt. She drew me the street and put the names of the people in the houses who lived there at the time. So I asked my son, who's an architect, to do a drawing – but he Google mapped it – and 20 houses are gone. Now that," she says, with gravity "was an erasure of place that was very disturbing to me." How so? "It's absence. Not just one house. But where all those memories were. It's a death, in that sense."

About 20 years ago, Morrison's boathouse burned to the ground. She lost manuscripts, family heirlooms, even her sons' school reports. Besides the house she built in its



MAKING HISTORY

(Clockwise, from far left) Toni Morrison with her sons Slade (right), who died in late 2010, and Ford; Danny Glover and Oprah Winfrey in the film adaptation of her novel 'Be Loved'; with Elton John and the opera singer Jessye Norman; and on Oprah's Book Club sofa



place, she owns an apartment in New York and a house in Princeton. When asked about where she feels most at home, Morrison is silent. Several seconds pass.

"I live in places that I love. And I'd hate to lose them. The house on the river I've been in since the Seventies. But home is an idea rather than a place. It's where you feel safe. Where you're among people who are kind to you – they're not after you; they don't have to like you – but they'll not hurt you. And if you're in trouble they'll help you... It's community – that's another word for what I've described." She pauses. "And we've moved from that in this country." Famously, Morrison once referred to Bill Clinton as "America's first black president" – a quote which she later said had been misunderstood. She'd been referring to the sex scandal and how he was being treated at the time.

In 2008 she told *Time* magazine: "I said he was being treated like a black on the street, already guilty, already a perp. I have no idea what his real instincts are, in terms of race." Her thoughts on America now, though, are no less disheartening.

"The notion that we're the best, the strongest – that we run the world. It's depressing. There's always an enemy somewhere – somebody to fight.

"China has kept this country floating for a long time in terms of the debt. You would think they wouldn't be so quick to dump on China. The power of the United States ought to be in its democratic principles. Its health. Its education. And that's not true. We've been wiped out. And if certain political changes take place, it will be the kind that will be faster – it won't be a generation or two. It will be quick. If the Republicans get their way." Her voice rises with amused outrage. "We don't want to go there!"

A few days before our meeting there was a news story that involved American state representative Lisa Brown, who

used the word "vagina" and was subsequently silenced during a debate on abortion in Michigan. The mention of this causes Morrison to burst out laughing. "They banned her. It's just awful." The absurdity of it continues to make her chuckle.

"Those men are frightened," she says, turning serious. Morrison takes issue with what she sees as politicians' somewhat selective attitude to sex.

"They've very happy with Viagra.

Which you can get easily. Legislate

Viagra – the way they're doing vaginas or wombs. What [Brown] is up against is not just stupid men – but a whole concrete idea of what power is. You don't have it if you're a woman. Certainly not over your reproduction." She exhales. "I thought that was over and done with."

This past May, President Obama presented Morrison with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. It is the highest civilian honour. The President said that not only was she a personal hero, but that reading her novel *Song of Solomon* taught him "how to be." She despairs at the "racism" and "contempt" now being directed at Obama's regime. "I just heard somebody on the radio say the President was a monkey and somebody else said, 'Oh that's terribly racist' and she said, 'No, monkeys are very intelligent.' It's just gossip out there. I'm waiting for some news." Morrison only watches BBC America for news. "At least they can tell you what's going on outside of the United States." She likes the fact that they're called newsreaders – "That's what they are!" – and that there are no advertisements for drugs.

Morrison did not own a television until she was in college. A few years ago, she admitted to enjoying *Law & Order* and *Waking the Dead*. To me, she reveals a working knowledge of reality television – but she sees little to enjoy.

"When you think about the churches, cathedrals," she begins, "that's art – there's a narrative. Good story. Lovely music. There's decoration. There's costume. It's all there. It's very impressive.

"The pop stuff – it's – it's so low. People used to stand around and watch lynchings. And clap and laugh and have picnics. And they used to watch hangings. We don't do that anymore. But we do watch these other car crashes.

"Crashes. Like those *Housewives*. Do you really think that your life is bigger, deeper, more profound because your life is on television? And they do." She says she's getting bored with entertainment. "I really want some meaning. It used to be easy to toss it off. Now it's harder and harder. You have to navigate just to find something that has nourishment. It's the absence of nourishment. What do you do in place of nourishment? It's usually junk. Either it's junk food or junk clothes or junk ideas." It occurs to me we have been talking for over two hours and when the time is mentioned, she gasps. She will need to go now – back to her house on the river – to be among friends, to work, and to garden. She will continue to write and to think and to offer the world her perspective, which in the end is, above all, artistic.

And optimism? Where does that fit in?

"I don't have any," she says – though I'm not sure I believe her. "But history helps me a lot. I just read this book by Hilary Mantel. You think of Henry VIII. They just chopped people's heads off! When you think about how it used to be... Human beings are better than that."

'Desdemona', by Toni Morrison, Peter Sellars and Rokia Traore is showing at the Barbican, London EC2, on 19 and 20 July. For tickets visit barbican.org.uk