

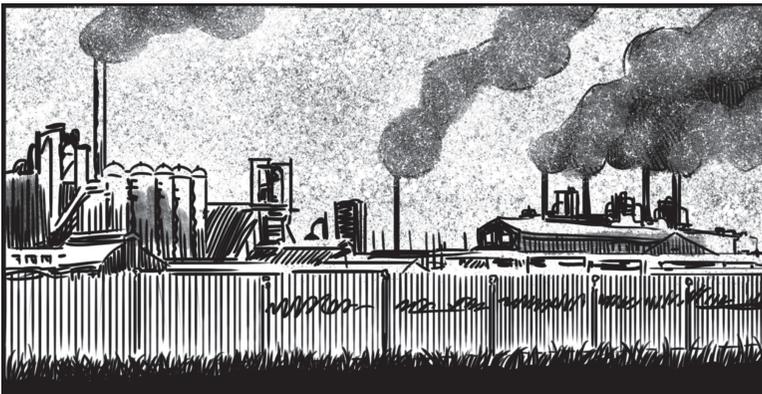
If you study the culture and art of African-Americans, you are not studying a regional or minor culture. What you are studying is America.

—Toni Morrison to Charlie Rose

HER LIFE

Chloe Anthony Wofford

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford—on February 18, 1931—in the steel-mill town of Lorain, Ohio. Her father, George, was a shipyard welder from Georgia. Her mother, Ramah Willis Wofford, came from Alabama. Morrison’s maternal grandfather, John Solomon Willis, was an ex-slave who had owned 88 acres of land in Alabama until some white Southern gentlemen cheated him out of it. Mr. Willis decided he’d had enough of the South and worked his family north to Lorain, a small industrial town west of Cleveland on Lake Erie. Lorain was full of European immigrants and Southern blacks who’d come to work in the steel mills.



Chloe's father George was a hard-working man who held down three jobs at the same time during the Great Depression. He grew up in Georgia amidst the lynching of young black men. He told his children that there would never be harmony between the races because white people didn't have the brains to overcome the bigotry they were taught as children.

Chloe's mother Ramah (a name picked at random from the Bible) felt that people who grew up in a racist society could eventually be changed by education. (But she wasn't going to hold her breath until it happened!)

Chloe, the second of four children, was quiet, kept to herself, and liked books. In her teens she read the masterpieces of European literature. She loved Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and especially the English writer Jane Austen. "Those books were not written for a little black girl in Lorain, Ohio," she told *Newsweek* magazine in 1981, "but they were so magnificently done that I got them anyway."

Chloe never thought of being a writer, but without realizing it, she absorbed the folktales and songs that were part of Southern black culture. One children's song her mother's family sang began with the words, "Green, the only son of Solomon." It was a song Morrison would use as the turning point in one of her most famous novels.

At age 17, Chloe left Ohio to attend Howard University in Washington, D.C.





Howard University

Founded in 1867 by white clergymen, Howard started as a school for black preachers and evolved into one of the best colleges in the country. It was home to legendary educators like Alain Locke, the philosopher/poet who spearheaded the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, and Sterling A.

Brown, the poet/professor who helped establish African American literary criticism. Among the university's graduates were former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, opera singer Jessye Norman, and actor Ossie Davis.

Chloe chose to major in English even though black literary consciousness was still in its infancy in the 1940s. Even at a black college like Howard, great writers like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston were not widely read. Chloe, who wanted to be a dancer, changed her name to Toni and joined the Howard University Players' tours of the Deep South. Seeing what life was like for Southern blacks gave her a taste of the racism her parents had endured.

After graduation, Toni attended Cornell University for her master's degree in English. Her thesis—foreshadowing the style of her writing and her predilection for grim subject matter—was on the theme of suicide in the novels of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. After Cornell, Toni taught English at Texas Southern University in Houston, where she began to think of black culture as a subject for formal study. “Before that it had only been on a very personal level—my family,” she would say.

Toni returned to Howard University in 1957 as an English teacher and met people who would play key roles in the struggle



for African American equality: the radical poet Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones); Andrew Young, future mayor of Atlanta and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations; and Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Touré), a lively wisecracker who stood in the front lines of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s.

Marriage

While teaching at Howard, Toni fell in love with a young architect from Jamaica named Harold Morrison. They were married in 1958. Their first son, Harold Ford, was born in 1961. Although she continued to teach, Toni began to feel restless. She joined a writers' group, not because she wanted to write but because she wanted the company of interesting people.

Each member of the group had to bring in a story. One week, Toni ran out of old writings to bring and, knowing that she had to dash off something new, remembered a conversation she'd had with another little black girl growing up in Ohio. The girl said she had stopped believing in God because, after two years of praying for blue eyes, God still hadn't given them to her. Morrison quickly wrote the story, read it to the writers' group, and put it in a drawer.

In 1964, pregnant with her second child, Morrison quit her job at Howard and took a trip to Europe with her husband and son. By the

time she returned, the marriage had ended. In later years she would look back on this as a time of emptiness and confusion: “It was as though I had nothing left but my imagination. I had no will, no judgment, no perspective, no power, no authority, no self—just this brutal sense of irony, melancholy and a trembling respect for words.”

Toni Morrison found herself in a position that women everywhere can relate to: no husband, one child and another on the way, and jobless with no prospects for employment.

At the age of 33, depressed and confused, she returned to her parents’ home in Lorain.



The Syracuse Blues

Not long after the birth of her second son, Slade Kevin, Morrison left Ohio to take a job as a textbook editor in Syracuse, New York. Mornings, she would leave little Harold and Slade with the housekeeper while she went to work. After work, like working mothers everywhere, she would make dinner for her sons and spend a few hours with them until their bedtime.

Although she lived in Syracuse for two full years, Morrison made no friends. Working from nine to five, caring for her sons, and having no social life, Morrison grew increasingly depressed. One night, in the quiet hours when her sons slept, she picked up a notebook and began to write. As the words washed through her, she began to feel that writing might be a way to escape the desperation she felt in this cold, lonely city. As she wrote, the characters she wrote about began taking on lives of their own ... and making demands of their own. They wanted or seemed to want (she wondered if she was going crazy for thinking words on a piece of paper could *want* anything) the little scrap of story she’d written years ago. So, during

the Syracuse winter of 1967, Toni Morrison dug up the story about the little girl who prayed for blue eyes...



What was going on in Morrison's head? Why does a 35-year-old woman suddenly begin writing a novel? Indeed it took years before Morrison understood her own journey. More than ten years later, in a 1978 interview with Jane Bakerman for *Black American Literature Forum*, she still sounded mystified:

I was in a place where there was nobody I could talk to and have real conversations with. I was also very unhappy. So I wrote then, for that reason.

In 1983, some 15 years after the fact, she told literary critic Claudia Tate:

It happened after my father died. It happened after my divorce. It has happened other times. Now I know how to bring it about without going through the actual event. It's exactly what Guitar [a character in Song of Solomon] said: "when you release all the shit, then you can fly."



After working all day as an editor, Morrison would return home each night to her writing. Whether it was published or not, she knew she couldn't stop writing this, this ... novel. She called it *The Bluest Eye*. Sometimes she would think, "No one is ever going to read this until I'm dead."

The Bluest Eye

***The Bluest Eye* is the story of three black schoolgirls growing up in Ohio, the sisters Claudia and Frieda McTeer and their friend Pecola Breedlove. Claudia, who tells much of the story, is a strong-willed eight-year-old. Pecola, her 11-year-old friend, thinks her life would be perfect if only she could have blue eyes.**

Afterword: New York City

After several rejections, *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970. By that time, TM was living in New York City and working as an editor for Random House. She had worked her way into the trade division,



where she could edit books by prominent black Americans (Muhammad Ali, Andrew Young, and Angela Davis, among others) and help develop the careers of promising black women writers (such as Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones). "Toni has done more to encourage and publish other black writers than anyone I know," Young told *Newsweek*.

The Bluest Eye was not a commercial success, but it did fairly well with critics. Neither TM nor the critics realized that she would become one of the premier novelists of her time. But that barely mattered for Morrison, who had discovered her magic.

Through a Glass Darkly...

Even though her novel wasn't a great success, Morrison was suddenly considered an authority on black cultural issues. She was publishing articles and book reviews, but she began to worry. Months had passed since she finished *The Bluest Eye*, and she didn't have an idea for another book. Maybe that was it—maybe she'd never write another novel?

It was the early 1970s. The Women's Liberation movement was gaining ground, but it struck TM as hopelessly, myopically, white-middle-class. Her irritation with the movement sparked an idea. Apparently, these newly enlightened white ladies had

decided that it was time for women to start loving one another, to begin being sisters and friends. But what did they mean *begin*, Morrison wondered? All her life, Toni had helped and been helped by her family and friends. Now she decided to try something that had rarely, if ever, been attempted in American fiction: to deeply explore a friendship between two black women.



Sula

The relationship between Nel Wright and Sula Peace is unique. Even as little girls, they are bound together by a terrible secret. Sula leaves town, returns years later, and betrays Nel, putting their friendship to the test.

Published in December 1973, *Sula* brought Toni Morrison national recognition. The novel was excerpted in *Redbook* magazine and nominated for the 1975 National Book Award. There was a bit of a controversy, however, when Sara Blackburn wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* that the novel lacked “the stinging immediacy” of Morrison’s nonfiction.

The author’s testy response: “She’s talking about my life. It has a stinging immediacy for me.”

The Black Book and Song of Solomon

Two months after the publication of *Sula*, Random House published *The Black Book*—described by Bill Cosby in the introduction as the kind of scrapbook we’d have “if a 300-year-old black man had decided to keep a record of what it was like for himself and his people.” This anthology of 300 years of African American life was compiled by historian and collector Middleton “Spike” Harris, and edited—as well as inspired by—Toni Morrison.

Working on the collection, Morrison sat in Harris’s apartment reading 200- and 300-year-old newspaper accounts of the tortures inflicted upon slaves. Among the newspaper clippings she found an 1856 article about a runaway slave who killed her own daughter rather than see her returned to slavery. Years later, this unthinkable episode would be the inspiration for Morrison’s most acclaimed novel.

In the meantime, another novel was coming together in TM’s mind. Because *Sula* had received so much attention for its strong female characters, naturally the fiercely unpredictable Morrison decided to write a novel powered by *men*.

But this was another difficult time in her personal life. She had money problems, her oldest son was entering manhood a bit too energetically, and her father died. TM went to Ohio for his funeral



and couldn't stop thinking about him after returning to New York. As she worked on her new novel, she had long conversations with him in her head. She needed her father's help to write this difficult new book about men. The result was one of the most astonishing novels of the century.

Song of Solomon

Macon Dead III—everyone calls him Milkman—leaves his home in Michigan and travels to the South in search of the fabled family fortune, a hidden treasure of gold. Although he never finds the gold, Milkman finds something more important.

***Song of Solomon* is a sweeping epic, much larger than the story of Milkman's quest. Morrison's description of her own book: "It's about black people who could fly."**



Aftersong

The publication of *Song of Solomon* (1977) changed Morrison's life. At the age of 46, she was an "overnight success." *Song* was the first novel by a black writer to be named a Book-of-the-Month Club selection since Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1940. *Song of Solomon* became a paperback bestseller, TM received the National Book Critics Circle Award, and President Jimmy Carter appointed her to the National Council on the Arts.

Despite her success, Morrison continued to work full-time at Random House, teach at Yale every Friday, and be both father and mother to her sons. Not long after the publication of her third novel, TM dropped off her son

Harold at his Manhattan piano lesson and drove aimlessly around the city to kill time. As she passed a Doubleday bookstore, she noticed a large display of books in the window. It took her a few beats to recognize the cover of *Song of Solomon*—accompanied by a huge sign: “A Triumph, by Toni Morrison.”

Literary Novelty, Media Event

Morrison, on the prowl for her next book, began reasoning, ruminating, and researching her way into another novel. It was so different from her other work, so audacious, so ... No reputable novelist would base a serious literary novel on an old African folktale that most people know as one of those silly old Uncle Remus stories ... would they? (*lickety split, lickety split*)

America generally does not make media stars of its authors. Norman Mailer never had his own line of 100-dollar Nike sneakers (“Air” Mailers?); nobody ever asked Joyce Carol Oates to host *Saturday Night Live*. But Toni Morrison was being peddled like a rock star. She wasn’t “just” a writer, she was a celebrity. And *Tar Baby* wasn’t just a book, it was a media event.



Tar Baby

Tar Baby, built on a foundation of black folklore and set on a Caribbean island, is a modern love story between Jadine, a beautiful, pampered black model, and an earthy dreadlocked outlaw named Son.

After the publication of *Tar Baby*, Morrison achieved the ultimate sign of success in America: “Are you really going to put a middle-aged, gray-haired colored lady on the cover of this magazine?” she asked. In March 1981, TM became the first black woman to appear on the cover of *Newsweek*. She was literature’s biggest star since Hemingway. After the *Newsweek* cover, publications everywhere featured articles on her. People were dazzled by the range of her activities: raising two sons, full-time job as an editor, teaching college, writing four novels—they called her Superwoman! *Tar Baby* stayed on the bestseller list for four months even though most critics considered it a disappointment.



Dreaming Emmett

In 1983, after 20 years of midwifing some of the seminal moments of the African American literary revolution of the 1970s, TM left Random House. In 1984, she was named Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at the State University of New York in Albany.

It was in Albany that Toni Morrison began working on her first play.

Emmett Till was a black Chicago teenager who, while visiting his uncle in Mississippi in 1955, was accused of whis-

tling at a white woman. Till, just 14, was shot in the head and thrown into a river. The white men charged with his murder were acquitted by an all-white jury. Because of its flagrant brutality and injustice, the Till murder became a rallying point for the early Civil Rights movement. In Morrison’s stage play, titled *Dreaming Emmett*, Emmett Till was allowed to speak on his own behalf. He was brought back from the dead to describe his murder in his own words...