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Toni Morrison: Paradise

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Paradise

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Morrison, Toni
(1998)

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Genre: Novel. Country: United States.

When Toni Morrison's seventh novel, *Paradise*, was published in 1998, this writer was already among the most esteemed novelists in the United States, having by then received the Nobel Prize for literature as well as many other major literary awards. In *Paradise*, which some scholars posit is the third novel in Morrison's series on love (her working title for the novel was "War"), she presents an imaginative recreation of historical events during the late Reconstruction era and the turn of the century post-Reconstruction era in the United States. In this book, Morrison, as is the

case with her earlier novels in this presumptive series (*Jazz* and *Beloved*), continues her archaeological excavation and reconstruction, in literature, of African American history.

From the mid-1870s, as Reconstruction was coming to an end, and into the turn of the twentieth century, formerly enslaved African Americans founded numerous all-black towns. At one time, the United States government had considered making the western territory a settlement for emancipated black people because wealthy members of some of the displaced Indigenous nations had engaged in slavery, supported the Confederacy, and were subject to land reappropriation. Additionally, the founders of the Afro-American Colonization Company in Guthrie, Oklahoma, had promoted the territory as a land of opportunity for hard-working black people. African Americans established the largest number of these towns on land that had been variously referred to as Indian Territory or in 1889 as Oklahoma Territory, and in 1907, the state of Oklahoma. Morrison situates her fictional town Haven, settled and founded 1889-1890, within this historical moment. She also constructs passages in her narrative that call to mind and revise actual historical events

—such as the destruction of the Greenwood district in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921—that occurred in settlements of African American people who migrated from the South into Logan and Okfuskee Counties as well as into other locations in Oklahoma.

Toni Morrison's *Haven* was founded in the nineteenth century by 158 wayfarers comprised of nine families, several individual members of other families, and a variety of people who joined them along the way. In 1949, economic difficulties following the Depression, along with the effects of post-war modernity, induce the founding families of Haven to relocate their town and its prized hand-constructed communal oven. The new town Ruby, settled by fifteen families, is the location of the events in July 1976, the narrative present of the novel and the bicentennial of the founding of the United States. Twenty-four years after Ruby's residents have relocated their town and their oven, the words inscribed on it become the focus of generational tensions. Part of the inscription is missing, and the residents are in a dispute over the meaning of the remaining words on the oven and over the words that are missing. This local struggle escalates into a battle that the men engage in out of fear of

change that they ultimately project on the women at the Convent.

Many of the men in Ruby are veterans of the war in the 1940s, immediately preceding the founding of the town, and of the Korean conflict and the Vietnam War. The older veterans in Ruby construct for themselves a localized communal narrative that recalls the biblical story of the Israelites and God's Promised Land, a biblical narrative in which some of the early European settlers in the North American New World also located themselves. And the streets in Ruby are named after the four gospels in the New Testament. For some of the residents of Ruby the fact that there have been no deaths in their town provides further proof to them that they are carrying out God's plan. Still, the stridently insular older veterans are in conflict not only with the younger generation war veterans whose lives have been influenced by the political events of the times—the ideas as well as the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X; the assassination of John F. Kennedy; desegregation, especially the NAACP's lawsuit in Norman, Oklahoma (there are sentiments in Ruby against the suit); and the racial unrest in major cities throughout the

United States in the 1960s—but also by the changing mores of the youth in general. Hence, a crucial impetus behind events in *Ruby* is the impending change in the town's communal identity, as the volatile social order outside Ruby influences the younger generation to press for shifts in the social order inside the town.

Although the social-political narrative of race plays a part in Morrison's *Paradise*, she ingeniously dispenses with racialized stereotypes throughout the novel as well as complicates the notion that racialized differences are crucial to the story she tells in *Paradise*. Although Morrison opens the novel with a reference to skin-color - "They shoot the white girl first" - she then goes on to fill *Paradise* with a number of complex characters whose speech, behaviour, perspectives, gestures, and lifestyles neither consistently belie nor affirm any particular ethnic cultural designation. Morrison's delineation of these characters most often points to the intricate and multiple influences that intersect the lives of all of her characters. Morrison's portrayal of the ethnically non-specific women at the convent, where skin color does not matter, challenges the color-

consciousness of her readers and undermines the insularity of the older residents of Ruby, whom Morrison describes as 8-rocks, using an African American cultural reference to the eight-ball in billiards: “Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they felt about those who weren’t 8-rock like them.” The residents of Ruby have made color central to their personal as well as their communal identity.

Each chapter in *Paradise* is named for a female character in the book, including the town—Ruby. Five of the nine chapters are organized around the year that each one of the women arrived at an old mansion in which the dining room had previously been “converted into a schoolroom, where stilled Arapaho girls once sat and learned to forget” at the Christ the King School for Native Girls. The school eventually closed, leaving the Reverend Mother and her assistant, Consolata, to live in the house, which is located at the edge of Ruby. Everyone calls this house the Convent. Morrison combines the narratives of the five women’s traumatic lives and their arrival at the Convent with the current events occurring in Ruby in the year each woman had begun living in the area. These events are interspersed with memories

of the history of Ruby. The five women, Consolata, Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas, who were living at the convent when it was attacked by nine men, become Morrison's sacrificial lambs whose destruction is led by the twins Deek and Steward Morgan, the New Fathers. These men are descendants of the nine Old Fathers and their families that walked from Louisiana and Mississippi into Oklahoma. The men initially believe that the destruction of the Convent is necessary for the survival of their town and their values. For the men of Ruby such values include patriarchal rule, strict morality, and an unspoken racial code based in an event they refer to as the "Disallowing". The women in the convent violate all of the aforementioned rules and are seen as an infectious agent wreaking havoc in the social body of their town, where no one has died in over twenty-five years. The four chapters in the novel—"Ruby", "Patricia", "Lone", "Save-Marie"—that do not present the arrival of women to the Convent instead present the events related to their deaths and to the first death in Ruby.

It is July 1976 and nine men from the Morgan, Smith, Fleetwood, Jury, Poole, and Person families in Ruby make a pre-dawn attack on

the Convent. Over the last eight years, the women who have lived at the Convent had sought refuge there after having experienced familial loss, dislocation, abuse, and betrayal. Through a final spiritual revelation from Consolata, the oldest resident, the women have healed themselves and have come to terms with the emotional wreckage that had resulted from their responses to their own pain. Some of the women in Ruby also have found solace at the Convent: Sweetie Fleetwood, Arnette Fleetwood Smith, Soan Morgan, and Billie Delia Cato, whose name, Delia, indicates Morrison's acknowledgement of Zora Neale Hurston as her predecessor. While some of the women, and at least one man, from Ruby have sought temporary refuge at the Convent, none of Ruby's women has lived at the Convent among the women that Morrison's narrator refers to as "Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary".

Following the attack on the women at the Convent, the residents of Ruby recognize the error that the New Fathers of the town have made. The people in the town decide, after all, that the apparent lack of repercussions for the actions of the men is a sign that they have been given a second chance. The cost, however, is

death, as the last chapter of the novel bears the name of the first person to die in Ruby, Save-Marie.

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* was a much-anticipated contribution to her literary corpus, as it was the first novel that she published following her receipt of the Nobel Prize for literature. The novel was released on 15 January, Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. *Paradise* received good reviews and was on the *New York Times* Best Sellers' list. Some reviewers noted, however, that Morrison's seventh novel was not the tour de force of her award winning book *Beloved*. While Morrison in *Paradise* provides her readers with many of the themes (history, the supernatural, womanist issues, community, love, family, reconstitution of the self) and stylistic elements (multiple perspectives, incremental revelation of details, beautiful turns of phrases) found in her previous novels, she also takes risks in *Paradise* as she defies her readers' expectations and questions the basis for as well as the value in the concept of race or in color-consciousness and one's investment in such mythologies.

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