

# 'I DIDN'T WANT TO COME BACK': TONI MORRISON ON LIFE, DEATH AND DESDEMONA

TONI MORRISON SAYS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN WRITING *DESDEMONA* WAS TO REMOVE IAGO'S 'WHITE MALE GAZE'.

Toni Morrison is telling me about the time she died several decades ago, and making it sound



strangely appealing. "I left my body and I was only eyes and mind, that's all," she says. "I could think and I could see. I didn't try to speak because I was so fascinated with this experience."

The captivating view from Morrison's lower Manhattan apartment runs north to the Empire State Building but her attention is elsewhere.

"I was moving down the street – sometimes slowly but, if I wanted to, I could go fast," she says. "Everything around me just looked incredible. I didn't want to come back but I had kids, so I tried to come back ... and then I'd get seduced into this thing I was doing."

Morrison mimes a struggle as she describes the difficulty of "getting back inside" her body, moving "from weightlessness to weight". She raises an index finger slowly from the arm of her chair, as if made from lead.

"The attraction! Ooh, it was better than anything I'd ever felt. It was free, it was intelligent and I was in control. And the only other time that happens – those three things – is when I write."

At 84, Morrison remains a commanding presence. Back problems have slowed her physically, but her manner is authoritative and sharply intelligent – honed to a keen understanding of contemporary life and not without a sense of fun.

Peppered through our conversation are detours – amusement at a recent scandal over a hacked dating site for married people seeking affairs; delight at an opera star's piano that "could play itself" and recollections of a charismatic neighbour from her childhood, nicknamed Cool Breeze.

The author of 11 novels, along with plays, children's literature and non-fiction works, she is a Nobel laureate (awarded in 1993) as well as a Pulitzer Prize winner, for the best-selling *Beloved* (1987). In 2012, Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, crediting her 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* with helping him "figure out how to write, but also how to be and how to think".

Sometimes called "the voice of America's conscience", Morrison writes about race, American history and gender, often with an unsentimental brutality. *Beloved* – inspired by a newspaper cutting – is about a slave who slits her daughter's throat rather than let her fall into captivity. It is set in a house haunted by the ghost of the murdered child.

It was a conversation with poet Lucille Clifton, in which Clifton revealed she conversed regularly with her deceased mother using a Ouija board, that triggered a strong identification for Morrison with her own out-of-body experience.

"One day, [Clifton's mother] said: 'Excuse me, I don't want to talk any more – I have something to do'," Morrison recalls, in wonderment at this unexpected message from beyond the grave. Places to go and people to meet even after you die. "I was absolutely struck."

That remembered sense of purposefulness in the afterlife – "something to do" – gave Morrison the freedom, she says, to write confidently about "dead people, ghosts or spirituality".

Morrison's *Desdemona* will be performed at the Melbourne Festival and the Sydney Festival in October. Peter Sellars is directing and music is by Malian singer-songwriter Rokia Traore, with Tina Benko in the lead role. Part-play, part-concert, the work takes Shakespeare's doomed heroine from *Othello* and allows her to speak from beyond the grave.

<https://youtu.be/v6Pr8-DzPGM> - desdemona

Moving the action into that space, where all the characters are already dead, allows for more ethical exchanges, says Morrison.

"They could tell the truth. They could confront, they could change their minds – there are no limits ... That was part of the joy of writing that play."

The work has its genesis in an argument between Sellars and Morrison about the worth of staging *Othello*.

"It's too thin," Sellars asserted. Morrison disagreed, adding that the role of Desdemona is consistently misunderstood: "She was almost like a pawn."

After vigorous debate about the bard's work, a pact of sorts was reached: Sellars would stage a production of the Shakespearean tragedy while Morrison would develop an alternate script, bringing Desdemona's story and power to the foreground.

*Desdemona* had its world premiere in Vienna in 2011 and has since played to positive reviews in Belgium, France, Germany and the United States. French audiences were moved by Traore's performance, with the reviewer from *Le Monde* praising her "absolutely magnificent presence" and *Liberation's* critic calling her "the show's magnet and soul". When *Desdemona* played in California, it was deemed a "great, challenging, haunting and lasting work". Together, Traore's lyrics and Morrison's text were deemed "transcendent".

As Morrison points out, this "little girl" – as Desdemona is usually portrayed – ran away from home and went to war. She also exhibits an intellectual curiosity, piqued by the stories told by Othello.

The most important thing, Morrison says, was removing Iago from the play. "He's there, eating up everything."

She refers to his presence as "the white male gaze" – something she excised long ago from her own writing. "Suddenly, without him there – talking, evaluating, defining himself – other characters said what they thought, spoke freely to each other and changed their minds. I got very excited about that."

In Morrison's play, Desdemona is in dialogue with her maid, Barbary (Traore); a figure only evoked in the fourth act of *Othello*. Morrison calls the performance "provocative" and the final denouement between Othello and Desdemona "very expressive", then laughs deeply, adding: "I assure you, or Peter would have cut it out."

Initially, she was hesitant to tackle the project. **"I didn't really want to rewrite, or write at or around or towards Shakespearean language, you know? But when I got the first line, in which she talks about what her name means, I didn't feel as if I was trailing the original author. Or competing. It was my stuff."**

Morrison's text opens with the lines: "My name is Desdemona. The word, Desdemona, means misery. It means ill-fated. It means doomed."

Names have always been vital to Morrison, especially those of her characters. *Sula*, *Beloved*, *Bride*, *Sweetness*, *Pilate*, *Milkman*. "They're not even three-dimensional or even alive to me unless I get their names right. If I get them wrong, they're flat. Whatever their names are – real names, nicknames – if I get that, then they talk, or feel or make me think things," she says.

The second of four children, Morrison was born Chloe Wofford, in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931. She wasn't "Toni" until college – a shortened form of her saint's name, Anthony – and Chloe is how she thinks of herself.

Her parents moved from the South, to escape poverty and violence. As a teenager, her father, George, had witnessed lynchings on his own street. He found work as a welder and other odd jobs. Morrison's mother, Ramah, was a homemaker. Even at \$4 a month, rent was hard to cobble together and the family was frequently evicted.

Although she grew up in a mixed neighbourhood ("not black, just poor"), Morrison chose to attend the historically black Howard College in Washington DC, to be "surrounded by black intellectuals" and later graduated with a Masters in American literature from Cornell. Her thesis was on work by Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, the value of which, she concluded, lay in "an effort to discover what pattern of existence is most conducive to honesty and self-knowledge, the prime requisites for living a significant life".

Morrison was 39 and working as an editor at Random House when her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970. As an editor, she was responsible for publishing work by other prominent black writers, including Angela Davis, Gayl Jones, Henry Dumas, Toni Cade Bambara and Muhammad Ali.

As well as editing, Morrison has always kept a hand in teaching, including at her alma mater and later at Princeton University. She doesn't think much of the current crop of fiction writers, who she finds too self-referencing. "When I teach creative writing, I would tell them, 'I don't want to hear about your little life, OK? Because you don't know nothing'."

Morrison even cancelled a contract to write her own memoir. "I like invention," she says. "I like to create new stuff. I know me, so only if they let me lie will I ever do a memoir – all the places I didn't go, I'll write about how I went there and what happened."

<https://youtu.be/EjdyX2wnwdY> - Why Toni Morrison Keeps Writing | The New York Times

Her 86-year-old sister, Lois, still lives in Lorain. A few years ago, Morrison was wondering about the location of one of their childhood homes – "a green house on a wiggly street" – and Lois made her a line drawing.

"The map was cute, but I gave it to my son [Ford], who's an architect, and said, 'Would you draw this nice and neat?'" He drew it, then searched on Google maps, and then delivered "a shocker". Morrison drops her voice to a whisper.

"There's nothing there. Not even a street. There are trees. It's not like it's dilapidated – it's gone," she says, drawing out this last word.

The fixation on childhood in her books, she figures, is an effort to put some of the past back together – these absences and erasures experienced by so many Americans. And there is resonance, in these "memories that are powerful and sort of non-factual ... a combination of how you remember it and what really happened."

**She is currently working on a novel set just after World War II – what she calls "my period". As with *Beloved*, part of her inspiration has come from an old news item, this time about a black war veteran who is accosted by a mob – including police – who "beat him up, punch out his eyes and take his medals".**

The novel is being written at a time when a spate of black victims to police brutality has provoked a media outcry and large public rallies. "The other day I said to someone, 'Do you not realise none of this is new?'" she says. "It's just that nobody ever said it. No one."

The main characters in the book will be two boys – one of them mute. As she is telling me this, I am looking at three large paintings by her son Slade, hanging over the fireplace. None of the figures has a mouth, but each has oversized ears.

Morrison had two sons – Ford and Slade – with her husband, architect Harold Morrison. They married in 1958 and divorced in 1964, during her second pregnancy.

Morrison and Slade collaborated on several children's books and were working together on a book of ghost stories at the time of his death from pancreatic cancer in 2010. He was 45.

She points out his paintings, hanging all around us in the living room – bright abstracts on the wall behind me, monochromatic portraits over the fireplace.

"He died Christmas four years ago – maybe five, speaking of time," she says. "I was shocked that somebody said it was four years. I thought it was last month. I mean, it just ..." She makes a whooshing sound. "It goes."

After a while, Morrison's inability to weep about Slade's death began to trouble her, and she shares a poignant tale of a visit to an optometrist. "There's something wrong with my tear ducts," she told him. "I can't cry."

Since then, people have told her to be patient; that it will happen, probably when she least expects it.

**"I had a woman in Italy tell me [that] she said the right things, she did the right things, she felt the right things, but she just couldn't weep," Morrison says. "And when she did, it was the most amazing cleansing."**

Morrison's editor, Robert Gottlieb, told her he didn't cry for two years after his mother died, then at "some stupid movie he didn't even remember, he started weeping," she says. "He said it went on for two days, just sobbing.

**"I haven't gotten there yet, but I look forward to it – maybe just one little tear," she says, quietly. "Please."**

*Desdemona* is at The Sumner, Southbank Theatre, as part of the Melbourne Festival, October 16-19, and will be performed at the Sydney Festival at the Roslyn Packer Theatre, October 23-25. [melbournefestival.com.au](http://melbournefestival.com.au) [www.sydneyfestival.org.au](http://www.sydneyfestival.org.au)

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/i-didnt-want-to-come-back-toni-morrison-on-life-death-and-desdemona-20150804-giqaxu.html>

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