

Toni Morrison

An Introductory session to the *English Reading Club*

What is this?

For every book that you read in our English Reading Club you will be getting a PDF quite similar to this one with information about the book to be discussed that month. In the PDF you will find a brief biography of the author, one or more articles dealing with his/her writing, and/or something about the novel. There might be some tips to interpret the book, which you are not required to read, but it will help you better understand and discuss the work. There can also be author interviews, reviews, analysis, or other kinds of material.

You will also be provided with a separate PDF in which you will find DISCUSSION QUESTIONS for the book. These are issues, topics, or specific questions about the plot, the characters, the structure, the language or other aspects of the book that you may be discussing with Camila during the sessions. It will help you to read through them (before, during or after you've read the book, that is up to you) and reflect on them—at least a little bit—before the meeting.

There is no book assigned to the September meeting, but Camila and I thought it would be a good idea to start warming up with some reading and discussion, and to do that she has chosen a very significant author that passed away just a few weeks ago: Toni Morrison. So, if you have the chance, take a look at the following materials before our first meeting on September 19th.

Welcome everyone to the English Reading Club.



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Brief Author Biography

Toni Morrison, original name Chloe Anthony Wofford, (born February 18, 1931, Lorain, Ohio, U.S.—died August 5, 2019, Bronx, New York), American writer noted for her examination of black experience (particularly black female experience) within the black community. She received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

Morrison grew up in the American Midwest in a family that possessed an intense love of and appreciation for black culture. Storytelling, songs, and folktales were a deeply formative part of her childhood. She attended Howard University (B.A., 1953) and Cornell University (M.A., 1955). After teaching at Texas Southern University for two years, she taught at Howard from 1957 to 1964. In 1965 Morrison became a fiction editor at Random House, where she worked for a number of years. In 1984 she began teaching writing at the State University of New York at Albany, which she left in 1989 to join the faculty of Princeton University; she retired in 2006.

Morrison's first book, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is a novel of initiation concerning a victimized adolescent black girl who is obsessed by white standards of beauty and longs to have blue eyes. In 1973 a second novel, *Sula*, was published; it examines (among other issues) the dynamics of friendship and the expectations for conformity within the

community. *Song of Solomon* (1977) is told by a male narrator in search of his identity; its publication brought Morrison to national attention. *Tar Baby* (1981), set on a Caribbean island, explores conflicts of race, class, and sex.

The critically acclaimed *Beloved* (1987), which won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction, is based on the true story of a runaway slave who, at the point of recapture, kills her infant daughter in order to spare her a life of slavery. In 1992 Morrison released *Jazz*, a story of violence and passion set in New York City's Harlem during the 1920s. Subsequent novels were *Paradise* (1998), a richly detailed portrait of a black utopian community in Oklahoma, and *Love* (2003), an intricate family story that reveals the myriad facets of love and its ostensible opposite. *A Mercy* (2008) deals with slavery in 17th-century America. In the redemptive *Home* (2012), a traumatized Korean War veteran encounters racism after returning home and later overcomes apathy to rescue his sister. In *God Help the Child* (2015), Morrison chronicled the ramifications of child abuse and neglect through the tale of Bride, a black girl with dark skin who is born to light-skinned parents.

A work of criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, was published in 1992. Many of Morrison's essays

and speeches were collected in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction* (2008; edited by Carolyn C. Denard) and *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (2019). She and her son, Slade Morrison, cowrote a number of children's books, including the *Who's Got Game?* series, *The Book About Mean People* (2002), and *Please, Louise* (2014). She also penned *Remember* (2004), which chronicles the hardships of black students during the integration of the American public school system; aimed at children, it uses archival photographs juxtaposed with captions speculating on the thoughts of their subjects. For that work, Morrison won the Coretta Scott King Award in 2005.

The central theme of Morrison's novels is the black American experience; in an unjust society, her characters struggle to find themselves and their cultural identity. Her use of fantasy, her sinuous poetic style, and her rich interweaving of the mythic gave her stories great strength and texture. In 2010 Morrison was made an officer of the French Legion of Honour. Two years later she was awarded the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom.

[Excerpts from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Toni-Morrison>]

Toni Morrison quotes



Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another.

*

You wanna fly, you got to give up the thing that weighs you down.

*

There is really nothing more to say-except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.

*

As you enter positions of trust and power, dream a little before you think.

*

I would solve a lot of literary problems just thinking about a character in the subway, where you can't do anything anyway.

*

If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.

*

At some point in life the world's beauty becomes enough. You don't need to photograph, paint, or even remember it. It is enough.

*

She is a friend of my mind. She gathered me, man. The pieces I am, she gathered them and gave them back to me in all the right order.

*

About *Tar Baby*

Tar Baby, Toni Morrison's fourth novel, was published in 1981.

Plot introduction

This novel portrays a love affair between Jadine and Son, two Black Americans from very different worlds. Jadine is a beautiful Sorbonne graduate and fashion model who has been sponsored into wealth and privilege by the Streets, a wealthy white family who employ Jadine's aunt and uncle as domestic servants. Son is an impoverished, strong-minded man who washes up at the Streets' estate on a Caribbean island. As Jadine and Son come together, their affair ruptures the illusions and self-deceptions that held together the world and relationships at the estate. They travel back to the U.S. to search for somewhere they can both be at home, and find that their homes hold poison for each other. The struggle of Jadine and Son reveals the pain, struggle, and compromises confronting Black Americans seeking to live and love with integrity in the United States.

Title

Tar Baby is also a name [...] that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall.

At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things.

It held together things like Moses' little boat and the pyramids.

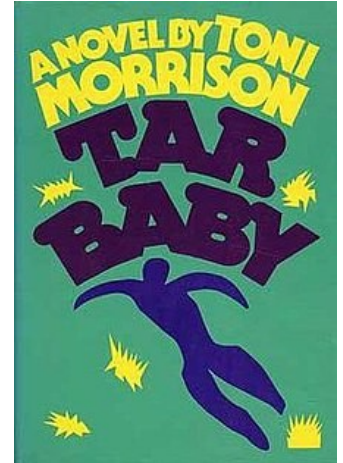
For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together.

— interview with Morrison by Karin L. Badt (1995)

Reception

The *New York Times* reviewer wrote of *Tar Baby*: "...Toni Morrison's greatest accomplishment is that she has raised her novel above the social realism that too many black novels and women's novels are trapped in. She has succeeded in writing about race and women symbolically."

[Excerpts from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tar_Baby_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tar_Baby_(novel))]



Tar Baby - Opening chapter

THE END of the world, as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses on Isle des Chevaliers. When laborers imported from Haiti came to clear the land, clouds and fish were convinced that the world was over, that the sea-green green of the sea and the sky-blue sky of the sky were no longer permanent. Wild parrots that had escaped the stones of hungry children in Queen of France agreed and raised havoc as they flew away to look for yet another refuge. Only the champion daisy trees were serene. After all, they were part of a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity, so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamondbacks that slept in their arms. It took the river to persuade them that indeed the world was altered. That never again would the rain be equal, and by the time they realized it and had run their roots deeper, clutching the earth like lost boys found, it was too late. The men had already folded the earth where there had been no fold and hollowed her where there had been no hollow, which explains what happened to the river. It crested, then lost its course, and finally its head. Evicted from the place where it had lived, and forced into unknown turf, it could not form its pools or waterfalls, and ran every which way. The clouds gathered together, stood still and watched the river scuttle around the forest floor, crash headlong into the haunches of hills

with no notion of where it was going, until exhausted, ill and grieving, it slowed to a stop just twenty leagues short of the sea.

The clouds looked at each other, then broke apart in confusion. Fish heard their hooves as they raced off to carry the news of the scatterbrained river to the peaks of hills and the tops of the champion daisy trees. But it was too late. The men had gnawed through the daisy trees until, wild-eyed and yelling, they broke in two and hit the ground. In the huge silence that followed their fall, orchids spiraled down to join them.

When it was over, and houses instead grew in the hills, those trees that had been spared dreamed of their comrades for years afterward and their nightmare mutterings annoyed the diamondbacks who left them for the new growth that came to life in spaces the sun saw for the first time. Then the rain changed and was no longer equal. Now it rained not just for an hour every day at the same time, but in seasons, abusing the river even more. Poor insulted, brokenhearted river. Poor demented stream. Now it sat in one place like a grandmother and became a swamp the Haitians called Sein de Vieilles. And witch's tit it was: a shriveled fogbound oval seeping with a thick black substance that even mosquitoes could not live near. But high above it were hills and

vales so bountiful it made visitors tired to look at them: bougainvillea, avocado, poinsettia, lime, banana, coconut and the last of the rain forest's champion trees. Of the houses built there, the oldest and most impressive was L'Arbe de la Croix. It had been designed by a brilliant Mexican architect, but the Haitian laborers had no union and therefore could not distinguish between craft and art, so while the panes did not fit their sashes, the windowsills and door saddles were carved lovingly to perfection. They sometimes forgot or ignored the determination of water to flow downhill so the toilets and bidets could not always produce a uniformly strong swirl of water. But the eaves were so wide and deep that the windows could be left open even in a storm and no rain could enter the rooms--only wind, scents and torn-away leaves. The floor planks were tongue-in-groove, but the hand-kilned tiles from Mexico, though beautiful to behold, loosened at a touch. Yet the doors were plumb and their knobs, hinges and locks secure as turtles.

It was a wonderful house. Wide, breezy and full of light. Built in the days when plaster was taken for granted and with the sun and the airstream in mind, it needed no air conditioning. Graceful landscaping kept the house just under a surfeit of beauty. Every effort had been made to keep it from looking "designed." Almost nothing was askew and the few things that were had charm: the

little island touches here and there (a washhouse, a kitchen garden, for example) were practical. At least that was the judgment of discriminating visitors. They all agreed that except for the unfortunate choice of its name it was "the most handsomely articulated and blessedly unrheterical house in the Caribbean." One or two had reservations--wondered whether all that interior sunlight wasn't a little too robust and hadn't the owner gone rather overboard with the recent addition of a greenhouse? Valerian Street was mindful of their criticism, but completely indifferent to it. His gray eyes drifted over the faces of such guests like a four o'clock shadow on its way to twilight. They reminded him of the Philadelphia widows who, when they heard he was going to spend the whole first year of his retirement in his island house, said, "You'll be back. Six months and you will be bored out of your mind." That was four Decembers ago, and the only things he missed were hydrangeas and the postman. The new greenhouse made it possible to reproduce the hydrangea but the postman was lost to him forever. The rest of what he loved he brought with him: some records, garden shears, a sixty-four-bulb chandelier, a light blue tennis shirt and the Principal Beauty of Maine. Ferrara Brothers (Domestic and International) took care of the rest, and with the help of two servants, the Principal Beauty and mounds of

careful correspondence he was finally installed for the year on a hill high enough to watch the sea from three sides. Not that he was interested. Beyond its providing the weather that helped or prevented the steamers bringing mail, he never gave the sea a thought. And whatever he did think about, he thought it privately in his greenhouse. In the late afternoons, when the heat had to be taken seriously, and early in the morning, he was there. Long before the Principal Beauty had removed her sleeping mask, he turned the switch that brought the "Goldberg" Variations into the greenhouse. At first he'd experimented with Chopin and some of the Russians, but the Magnum Rex peonies, overwhelmed by all that passion, whined and curled their lips. He settled finally on Bach for germination, Haydn and Liszt for strong sprouting. After that all of the plants seemed content with Rampal's Rondo in D. By the time he sugared his breakfast coffee, the peonies, the anemones and all their kind had heard forty or fifty minutes of music which nourished them but set Sydney the butler's teeth on edge although he'd heard some variety of it every day for forty years. What made it bearable now was that the music was confined to the greenhouse and not swarming all through the house as it often did back in Philadelphia. He could hear it only thinly now as he wiped moisture beads from a glass of

iced water with a white napkin. He set it near the cup and saucer and noticed how much the liver spots had faded on his employer's hand. Mr. Street thought it was the lotion he rubbed on nightly, but Sydney thought it was the natural tanning of the skin in this place they had all come to three years ago.

Except for the kitchen, which had a look of permanence, the rest of the house had a hotel feel about it--a kind of sooner or later leaving appearance: a painting or two hung in an all right place but none was actually stationed or properly lit; the really fine china was still boxed and waiting for a decision nobody was willing to make. It was hard to serve well in the tentativeness. No crystal available (it too was closed away in Philadelphia) so a few silver trays had to do for everything from fruit to petits fours. Every now and then, the Principal Beauty, on one of her trips, brought back from the States another carton chock-full of something Sydney asked for: the blender, the carborundum stone, two more tablecloths. These items had to be carefully selected because they were exchanged for other items that she insisted on taking back to Philadelphia. It was her way of keeping intact the illusion that they still lived in the States but were wintering near Dominique. Her husband encouraged her fantasy by knotting every loose

string of conversation with the observation "It can wait till we get home." Six months after they'd arrived Sydney told his wife that periodic airing of trunk luggage in the sunlight was more habit than intention. They would have to tear down that greenhouse to get him off the island because as long as it was there, he'd be there too. What the devil does he do in there, she had asked him.

"Relaxes a little, that's all. Drinks a bit, reads, listens to his records."

"Can't nobody spend every day in a shed for three years without being up to some devilment," she said.

"It's not a shed," said Sydney. "It's a greenhouse I keep telling you."

"Whatever you call it."

"He grows hydrangeas in there. And dahlias."

"If he wants hydrangeas he should go back home. He hauls everybody down to the equator to grow Northern flowers?"

"It's not just that. Remember how he liked his study back at the house? Well, it's like that, except it's a greenhouse kind of a study."

"Anybody build a greenhouse on the equator ought to be shame."

"This is not the equator."

"Could of fooled me."

"Nowhere near it."

"You mean there's some place on this planet hotter than this?"

"I thought you liked it here."

"Love it."

"Then stop complaining."

"It's because I do love it that I'm complaining. I'd like to know if it's permanent. Living like this you can't figure nothing. He might pack up any minute and trot off someplace else."

"He'll be here till he dies," Sydney told her. "Less that greenhouse burns up."

"Well, I'll pray nothing happens to it," she said, but she needn't have. Valerian took very good care of the greenhouse for it was a nice place to talk to his ghosts in peace while he transplanted, fed, air-layered, rooted, watered, dried and thinned his plants. He kept a small refrigerator of Blanc de Blancs and read seed catalogs while he sipped the wine.

Sometimes he gazed through the little greenhouse panes at the washhouse. Other times he checked catalogs, brochures and entered into ringing correspondence with nurseries from Tokyo to Newburgh, New York. He read only mail these days, having given up books because the language in them had changed so much--stained with rivulets of disorder and meaninglessness. He loved the greenhouse and the island, but not his neighbors. Luckily there was a night, three years ago, after he'd first settled into tropic

life, when he woke up with a toothache so brutal it lifted him out of bed and knocked him to his knees. He knelt on the floor clutching the Billy Blass sheets and thinking, This must be a stroke. No tooth could do this to me. Directly above the waves of pain his left eye was crying while his right went dry with rage. He crawled to the night table and pressed the button that called Sydney. When he arrived, Valerian insisted on being taken to Queen of France at once, but there was no way to get there. At that hour fishermen had not even begun to stir and the launch was twice a week. They owned no boat and even if they had neither Sydney nor anyone else could handle it. So the quick-witted butler telephoned the neighbors Valerian hated and got both the use of a fifty-six-foot Palaos called Seabird II and the boat skills of the Filipino houseboy. After a daring jeep ride in the dark, an interminable boat ride and a taxi ride that was itself a memory, they arrived at Dr. Michelin's door at 2:00 a.m. Sydney banged while the Filipino chatted with the taxi driver. The dentist roared out the second floor window. He had been run out of Algeria and thought his door was being assaulted by local Blacks--whose teeth he would not repair. At last, Valerian, limp and craven, sat in the dentist's chair where he gave himself up to whatever the Frenchman had in mind. Dr. Michelin positioned a needle

toward the roof of Valerian's mouth but seemed to change his mind at the last minute, for Valerian felt the needle shoot straight into his nostril on up to the pupil of his eye and out his left temple. He stretched his hand toward the doctor's trousers, hoping that his death grip--the one they always had to pry loose--would be found to contain the crushed balls of a D.D.S. But before he could get a grip under the plaid bathrobe, the pain disappeared and Valerian wept outright, grateful for the absence of all sensation in his head. Dr. Michelin didn't do another thing. He just sat down and poured himself a drink, eyeing his patient in silence.

This encounter, born in encouraged hatred, ended in affection. The good doctor let Valerian swallow a little of his brandy through a straw and against his better judgment, and Valerian recognized a man who took his medical oaths seriously. They got good and drunk together that night, and the combination of Novocain and brandy gave Valerian an expansiveness he had not felt in years. They visited each other occasionally and whenever Valerian thought of that first meeting he touched the place where the abscess had been and smiled. It had a comic book quality about it: two elderly men drunk and quarreling about Pershing (whom Valerian had actually seen), neither one mentioning then or ever the

subject of exile or advanced years which was what they had in common. Both felt as though they had been run out of their homes. Robert Michelin expelled from Algeria; Valerian Street voluntarily exiled from Philadelphia.

Both had been married before and the long years of a second marriage had done nothing to make either forget his first. The memory of those years of grief in the wake of a termagant was still keen. Michelin had remarried within a year of his divorce, but Valerian stayed a bachelor for a long time and on purpose until he went out for an after lunch stroll on a wintry day in Maine, a stroll he hoped would get rid of the irritable boredom he'd felt among all those food industry appliance reps. His walk from the inn had taken him only two blocks to the main street when he found himself in the middle of a local Snow Carnival Parade. He saw the polar bear and then he saw her. The bear was standing on its hind feet, its front ones raised in benediction. A rosy-cheeked girl was holding on to one of the bear's forefeet like a bride. The plastic igloo behind them threw into dazzling relief her red velvet coat and the ermine muff she waved to the crowd. The moment he saw her something inside him knelt down.

