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Born Chloe Ardelia Wofford, she developed an impressive oeuvre. When she began writing her first novel, The Bluest Eye, she woke up every morning at 4 a.m. to write:  "Ohio-born Chloe Ardelia Wofford (b. 1931), who became Toni Morrison, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, the first black American woman to be so honored, has produced ten novels and a good deal of ancillary work.  "One of her novels, Beloved (1987), outstrips Invisible Man in terms of celebrity and shares with it a basic theme. Ellison's controlled, unnamed protagonist, continually possessed, acts out with more or less success roles others give him. 'For the next few months our new brother is to undergo a period of intense study and indoctrination under the guidance of Brother Hambro.' Morrison's Sethe, by contrast, being a single black woman, is below the radar of the con­trollers, not written off but simply unacknowledged, and thus paradoxically in a place where she can be free if she can summon the strength and will to find her own identity. 'In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it ... hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.' The key words are flesh and love.  "'What is exciting about American literature,' Morrison says, 'is that busi­ness of how writers say things under, beneath, and around their stories. Think of Pudd'nhead Wilson and all these inversions of what race is, how sometimes nobody can tell, or the thrill of discovery?' Always, too, there is Faulkner, how in Absalom, Absalom! he 'spends the entire book tracing race and you can't find it. No one can see it, even the character who is black can't see it.'  "Though she returned a publisher's advance for an autobiography on the grounds that her life was not of sufficient interest to sustain such a book, as a novelist she is content to have her fiction considered as personal narrative along­side memoirs and autobiographies. She is 'deadly serious,' she insists, about establishing 'the milieu out of which I write and from which my ancestors actually lived.' She has in mind the slave narratives in which milieu entails 'the absence of the interior life, the deliberate excising of it from the records that the slaves themselves told.' Those voices, which reach us filtered by the white me­diums who transcribed them, she tries to coax alive. 'Like the dead-seeming cold rocks,' Zora Neale Hurston said, 'I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me.' This licenses Morrison's fiction: out of the hitherto mute soil of self it grows, truthful, if not factually true.  "Though she returned a publisher's advance for an autobiography on the grounds that her life was not of sufficient interest to sustain such a book, as a novelist she is content to have her fiction considered as personal narrative along­side memoirs and autobiographies. She is 'deadly serious,' she insists, about establishing 'the milieu out of which I write and from which my ancestors actually lived.' She has in mind the slave narratives in which milieu entails 'the absence of the interior life, the deliberate excising of it from the records that the slaves themselves told.' Those voices, which reach us filtered by the white me­diums who transcribed them, she tries to coax alive. 'Like the dead-seeming cold rocks,' Zora Neale Hurston said, 'I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me.' This licenses Morrison's fiction: out of the hitherto mute soil of self it grows, truthful, if not factually true.   |  | | --- | |  | | **Morrison's portrait on the first-edition dust jacket of The Bluest Eye (1970)** |   "Her first novel, The Bluest Eye (1970), grew out of a short story she wrote as an undergraduate in a writing group at Howard University in segregated Wash­ington, D.C. The story stayed with her as she completed her MA at Cornell (her thesis being on the theme of suicide in Faulkner and Woolf) and into her teach­ing career in various institutions. It was published when she was working at Random House in New York. It surprised her colleagues, who had no idea that this editor of, among others, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, and Angela Davis was herself an author until her book was reviewed in the New York Times. Her editor at Holt took her on, she surmised, because in the late 1960s a lot of black men were being published, and he thought to take a risk. 'He was wrong. What was selling was: Let me tell you how powerful I am and how horrible you are, or some version of that.' Her book was quiet by comparison, well made. She was a slow writer and her third book, Song of Solomon (1977), established her as a writer. It was the main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, the first book by a black woman ever chosen, and the first by a black writer since Rich­ard Wright's Native Son in 1940. It tells the life story of Macon Dead III (nick­named 'The Milkman' because he breast-fed into his childhood) from cradle to maturity in Michigan. His best friend and eventually his possibly fatal en­emy is Guitar, a Huck Finn sort of boy to Macon's Tom Sawyer, but their boy­hoods pass too quickly for this story to build. Here and in her other novels she reveals the end at the beginning, so that the reader is curious not about what but how, attention trained on process.  "Beloved is Morrison's fifth and most popular novel. Though she is not inter­ested in 'real-life people as subjects for fiction,' there is a real-life figure, Marga­ret Garner, behind her protagonist Sethe. 'I really don't know anything about her,' says Morrison, though a name is something and the fact of her tragedy is something too. These are adequate occasions and do not entail appropriation. She read, in fact, two interviews and said to herself, 'Isn't this extraordinary. Here's a woman who escaped into Cincinnati from the horrors of slavery and was not crazy. Though she'd killed her child, she was not foaming at the mouth. She was very calm; she said, I'd do it again. That was more than enough to fire my imagination.' Too much knowledge would have stopped the novelist's mouth: 'There would have been no place in there for me. It would be like a recipe already cooked.'"   |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | |  |  | | --- | --- | | **[The Novel](https://delanceyplace.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=6557fc90400ccd10e100a13f4&id=ef7847f1f0&e=efaa6d204d)** |  | |  | | **author:** Michael Schmidt |  | | **title:** The Novel |  | | **publisher:** The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press |  | | **date:** Copyright 2014 by Michael Schmidt |  | | **page(s):** 759-761 |  | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | **[The Novel](https://delanceyplace.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=6557fc90400ccd10e100a13f4&id=28b2366c0d&e=efaa6d204d)** |  | |  |   [**Read in browser »**](https://delanceyplace.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=6557fc90400ccd10e100a13f4&id=ee74af4541&e=efaa6d204d) | | | | | |