THE SEAMS CAN'T SHOW: AN INTERVIEW
WITH TONI MORRISON*

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Toni Morrison is hooked on writing. Though she didn’t intend to become an author, she turned to fiction during a period of stress, driven, she thinks, by loneliness:

I never planned to be a writer. I was in a place where there was nobody I could talk to and have real conversations with. And I think I was also very unhappy. So I wrote then, for that reason. And then, after I had published, it was sort of a compulsive thing because it was a way of knowing, a way of thinking that I found really necessary.

Since the readers of The Bluest Eye and Sula are themselves hooked on Morrison’s fiction, the fact that she can’t imagine not writing is both a comfort and a source of satisfaction. The new novel, Song of Solomon, appeared last fall, published by Knopf, the same firm which brought out Sula, and a fourth novel is just beginning to take shape. It will be called Tar Baby, and is just in its initial stages now, too new to be discussed. Morrison says that she can be coherent only about the title at this point, “because it’s in the note-taking stage. The story is fairly clear, but there are whole worlds of it that I don’t have yet, so that anything I said about it might be altered.”

As a rule, Toni Morrison never knows what the next book is going to be while she is immersed in the current project, but the idea always comes, even if it’s after a long period of total depression. After Sula, it was very depressing; I missed all the characters. And then it meant that I didn’t have anything to think about in that way while I was going about the world. When one is working on a book, whatever one does, whether you’re feeling good or you don’t feel so good, your writing is something going on inside. So that’s what I was really missing. I would write if there were no publishers at all! It’s the only thing I do for myself alone.

But following the composition of Song of Solomon, the period of depression, if it existed at all, was very brief, and the thinking process is centered on Tar Baby.

Generally, it takes Morrison about two to two and a half years to produce a novel, and there are several reasons for that time span. One is that she aims for a genuinely polished, beautiful whole. Well aware of the work and even the struggle which go into the preparation of a novel, she insists that that part of the process ought not to be apparent to the reader: “The point is so that it doesn’t look like it’s sweating, like that effort, you see? It must appear effortless! No matter what the style, it must have that. I mean the seams can’t show.” Another reason for the substantial incubation times for the novels is the simple fact that Toni Morrison is a very busy person, busy being a mother, editor, and teacher, as well as an author. Here, too, one has the feeling that in her hands life is balanced and handled so as to appear seamless. To balance her professional obligations, she’s learned to organize and to simplify her life as far as possible.

What happens, I think, when you do several things is that you cut a lot of things out. So I don’t entertain people very much and I’m not entertained very much. So, if you don’t go to a dinner party, you have three hours to do something else in. Also, I don’t live in the city; I live in the country, and I get up early—I always have—it’s not any effort for me to do that, and take care of the house business with the children—Slade, 12, and Dino, 16—take them to school and so on.

This job, as Senior Editor at Random House, is very demanding, but doesn’t so much require being in the office. Most of the real work you do of editing is done at home. Then, I teach at Yale one day a week, during one semester; that takes up all of Friday.

But I don’t write every day. I only think about it every day. But I think one thing that happens is that you learn to use time for more than one thing. If you’re cutting the lawn, you really can’t focus all of your mind on that, so you really are in the business of thinking through some different kinds of things. When I’m writing a book, there’s almost no time when it’s not on my mind—when I’m driving, doing dishes, or what have you. So by the time I get to the manuscript page, I have had some very clear thoughts about what I want to do!

Although most writers comment that they need long periods of sustained time to be alone to work, Morrison’s obligations don’t allow her that pattern. In fact, she now does her writing with the children there, in the room. While her sons are, of course, proud of their mother’s accomplishments,

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if I say that I have to write, that’s annoying to them; it takes me away from what I’m supposed to be doing, which is mothering them! I used to go into the back room to write, and they would come in there frequently, asking for things or fighting each other. And then it occurred to me that they didn’t want me to separate myself from them, so now I write in the big room where we all generally stay.

They didn’t want me and they didn’t have anything to say to me particularly; they just wanted the presence . . . .

And so another seam disappeared.

Other seams which must be obliterated develop because of Morrison’s writing method. For one thing, she doesn’t necessarily start at the beginning of the book:

No, I hit certain scenes that are clear to me, that I have a feeling, the language, the metaphor, for. I do those, and they may appear at any point in the book. I’ve never written the beginning of any book first; I didn’t know the beginning. I just start!

I think the beginnings can stop you, if you don’t have them right, and some people never go on, so I just start. And then, when I’m finished, sometimes I know what the beginning should have been, is . . . then I write it. I did that on Sula; I started on Shadrack.

On the other hand, she always knows the endings before she starts, even

the words, the sentences. As a matter of fact, on Sula, I knew myself from the beginning that the last words would be, "Oh . . . girl, girl, girlgirlgirl . . . ." So I wrote it, but then I wrote some more, and I wrote some more!

When my editor saw it, he said, "Tell me, where does the book end?" And I pointed to that sentence, which is where it had ended in my mind—and then I had added one more, which was really a close.

But I knew from the start the language of the ending and where it would be.

The earliest written stage of a Morrison novel consists of extensive comments aimed at giving her a true sense of the work. This stage is Tar Baby’s current status:

I don’t have an outline. Sometimes I sit down and write out what could be called a précis, except that it goes on and on and on. It’s like a plot, but it isn’t; it’s just things I think about the people and what happens. Notes. They’re notes, I suppose, but sometimes they have continuity. Parts of that stuff, I’m able to use verbatim, and some of it, I’m not. But it does give me a sense of the whole.

The reason I do that is because I have so many other things to do: I have to get it down someplace so that I can refresh my memory about certain things, not about the overall work I’m doing, but about the details which could slide by me and slip away.

At one point in the construction of Song of Solomon, for instance, Morrison was looking for a way of invoking the feeling of a very, very small rural town. She turned to her notes.

And I came across a sentence in that pile of stuff that I had written some time ago, that I had forgotten. I had written about how the women in the town walked down the streets with nothing in their hands . . . no pocketbooks, no money, no keys. That was just what I wanted to say because the place where one can do that, just get up and walk out the door and go, somewhere, on some business and not have to remember to take the key or money or whatever, would be a place in which you either felt extremely comfortable or be so far back in the backwoods . . . you know, be a small, little community. So that reminded me, and I used it so the reader would know what kind of a place that must be.

During the writing of Sula, another kind of preparatory note came in handy. In addition to the précis, Morrison often jots down, sometimes on tiny scraps of paper, ideas or phrases which will “open the door to a scene,” will convey a tone or a mood. In this instance it was “It was too cool for ice cream,” a phrase that for her meant “just a certain kind of day.” From that small trigger, the whole scene arose.

Doing the books by scenes, in this way, does, of course, demand very careful revision in order to achieve the polished, seemingly effortless whole Morrison is after. Fortunately, that step affords her enormous satisfaction.

I love that part; that’s the best part, revision. I do it even after the books are bound! Thinking about it before you write it is delicious. Writing it all out for the first time is painful because so much of the writing isn’t very good. I didn’t know in the beginning that I could go back and make it better; so I minded very much writing badly. But now I don’t mind at all because there’s that wonderful time in the future when I will make it better, when I can see better what I should have said and how to change it. I love that part!

Sometimes, doing that polishing is arduous because it cannot and must not be forced. Over and over,
Morrison stresses that the time spaces around composing and polishing periods are really essential. As a reader, she is certain that she knows instinctively when a writer has written too fast (even if he’s very, very good at his craft) because the passage just doesn’t feel natural. She says she’s done that herself, but “I’ve learned not to fight it. The right thing will happen if you’re not frightened and you relax.” Now, it might take months for the right thing to happen, but it does happen, often as a result of longer, even more careful thinking about the characters because they will often lead to the resolution of the problem. There are certain things they will or will not do, will or will not feel, and, of course, they must be allowed to behave as they genuinely would.

I remember writing that scene where Nel discovers Sula and her [Nel’s] husband making love. And she goes off into the bathroom and thinks. When I wrote it, I thought it was absolutely beautiful, purely distilled pain.

And my editor said that it was—but it wasn’t hers; it was mine. And he was right. I had written that scene the way I would have said it, had I felt this thing. And I had to write it again the way she would see it or feel it or think about it, what her images were.

This exploration of various characters is one quality which makes the novel form so attractive to Morrison; one has to put aside her own assumptions and explore those of a whole range of personalities, making the novel “the most demanding and the most challenging” genre.

Morrison has a lot of faith in the future of the novel, despite its frequently reported demise.

Novels aren’t dying! People crave narration. Magazines only sell because they have stories in them, not because somebody wants to read those ads! Aside from the little game shows, television is all narrative. People want to hear a story. They love it! That’s the way they learn things. That’s the way human beings organize their human knowledge—fairy tales, myths. All narration. And that’s why the novel is so important!

So Morrison’s aim is to provide narratives which will help readers to organize their knowledge, and to do it in a beautiful way. She’s very conscious of style, and she’s open to experimentation. At the outset, “I wanted to write in a very economical way because I wanted to provoke, evoke, and I rely very heavily on the reader to know a lot about what he does know. I just wanted to pull that out, so the writing would be extremely suggestive.” But Song of Solomon, she judges, is different:

I made a serious attempt to write it all out and not to write in a hermetic, closed way . . . simply because I hadn’t done it before and also because this book, I think, required it. It was a joyous but very difficult thing for me to do. But I was so elated, and I felt as though I were taking huge risks in doing it because my way is usually to say less rather than more in writing. To try to say a lot in a line.

To say a lot in a line, of course, requires close attention to the symbol structure of each book; for Toni Morrison, those symbols are often the route into a character or a scene.

You have to find the key, the clue. In language all you have are those 26 letters, some punctuation and some paper. So you have to do everything with just that.

A metaphor is a way of seeing something, either familiar or unfamiliar, in a way that you can grasp it. If I get the right one, then I’m all right. But I can’t just leap in with words, I have to get a hook. That’s the way I think; I need it, the phrase or the picture or the word or some gesture. I need that thing over Sula’s eye [the birthmark, “shaped something like a stemmed rose,” on Sula’s eyelid].

She looks, then, for features that “become integral parts of how people describe people,” and these devices come to stand for characterization, attitudes, roles in society. For the readers and for the characters who surround Sula, for instance, the birthmark can stand for beauty, for danger, for uniqueness; the symbol becomes the evocation of the character.

Sometimes, it’s easy to find the intellectual rationale which makes a symbol work. Again, a good example comes from Sula.

When Sula comes back, I knew that there would be a natural distortion, something out of kilter in nature. I wanted something undramatic, since dramatic and explosive things are happening in the plot. And I wanted something that was both strange and common. A plague of robins is very strange, but aberrations like that in nature are not.

I wanted two things to happen: first, to get the awful feeling of those birds everywhere at the moment of her arrival. And it is awful, her kicking them aside as she walks in. Second, it’s almost like the violin music in the score of a film; you know something is about to happen. And I also use repetition; I might mention it later in the book, or I might have mentioned it early in the story, so that the reader anticipates the plague of robins or some other symbol.

At other times, however, the process is not intellectual but rather almost wholly emotional or intuitive; it doesn’t lend itself readily to explanation.

A lot of what you write is right for you as a writer, but you can’t say why. You just know that that’s the way it must be. There’s some intelligence behind it, but not a whole lot. I guess that’s why people talk about muses! You can’t always explain it. I’ve had things like that happen . . .

The example Morrison cites here has to do again with Sula. She was working on a scene in which Eva’s husband, who had abandoned her, returned briefly. Originally, as BoyBoy left the house, Eva stood waiting to see what would happen, how she would feel when the numbness wore off. “‘He jumped into a T-Model Ford that was pea-green, and he hit the horn, and it said ‘oogah, oogah!!!’ . . . the way those old cars did. And as soon as she heard that sound, then she knew what to think; she hated him.’” To Morrison, the scene seemed to work, and it did—except for the fact that, as her editor pointed out, the time was too early for Model-T’s! So the scene had to be rewritten.

As it now stands, BoyBoy leaves the house to meet a woman in a pea-green dress who laughs “‘a high-pitched big-city laugh that reminded Eva of Chicago.’” The important point here is that for Morrison, and for her character, Eva’s emotions could be released only by the combination of the pea-green color and the
loud, braying, "big-city" sound of the car or the woman's laugh.

In my mind, whatever he was going to, was something that was pale green and there was a sound that came from it that would connect, you see. And that way it would release whatever the stuff was that Eva had not taken the trouble to see . . . . Now, that's the way I saw it. It's not important, except to me; it doesn't mean anything, except that's the way I visualized it.

In either case—whether the scene's symbol is intellectually or emotionally stimulated—Morrison's goal is spare, evocative prose. This pattern is consistent even in very sensual passages. Too much detail is, she believes, damaging.

It's boring. I can't really get into it. But I do know that whatever the reader has in his experience or his imagination, if you give him enough of the outline, enough suggestion . . . . if you give him the language, he will understand.

Like when Sula is making love to Ajax . . . . she may be talking about something entirely different, but they become sensual words because the reader is supplying it. As I am. I mean I'm putting in my own feelings and understanding. In other words, it's like a painter uses white space, a musician uses silence. So a writer has to use the words he does not use in order to get a certain kind of power.

And she underscores the point with another image: "I think the problem (as an editor and as a writer) is to say the thing properly so that you really remove cataracts and you let people know where their power is!"

Naturally, one of the chief factors in establishing any story and a particularly important factor in creating spare prose is the point of view employed. Morrison uses both the first and the third persons, but sometimes a combination is necessary to arrive at the proper effect.

I like the first person, when I'm assuming the character, but it's harder; it's too hard. When I wrote the section in The Bluest Eye about Pecola's mother, I thought I would have no trouble. First I wrote it out as an "I" story, but it didn't work because she, herself, didn't know a lot about things. Then I wrote it out as a "she" story, and that didn't work out very well because I couldn't get her thing into it. It was me, the author, sort of omnipotent, talking.

I was never able to resolve that, so I used both. The author said a little bit and then she said a little bit. But I wish I had been able to do the "I" thing with her. I really wanted to.

But it's hard because you are faced with the limitations of the character. And if they don't know it, they're not going to tell you! And they can't say it.

Although Morrison is very aware of her readers because of their warm response to her work, she does not keep any group of readers or any sort of "ideal" reader in mind as she writes. In part, that's not necessary because she rightly trusts her own good judgment as a reader, a skill she employs constantly in both her editorial work and in her fiction.

I'm sure I'm not the ideal reader in any way, but it's just a very important part of my life. And when you read something that you like, it's just so tremendous a thing. I use myself as the Black audience, and I am a discriminating reader about things I like. I just try to continue to do that to my work after I've written it, read it discriminatingly.

When I'm writing, it all seems wonderful, but later on it doesn't, and I change it. I rely on that judgment.

The trust in herself as both specifically a Black reader and a general reader and her insistence on not explaining too much merge in her comments about her responsibilities as a Black writer.

Yes, I do. I feel a responsibility to address—well, I say myself! At first, I didn't feel anything; I just thought that I wanted to write the kind of a book that I wanted to read. Later on, it changed. There was also something else—I felt that nobody talked about or wrote about those Black people the way I knew those people to be. And I was aware of that fact, that it was rare. Aware that there was an enormous amount of apology going on, even in the best writing.

But more important than that, there was so much explanation . . . the Black writers always explained something to somebody else. And I didn't want to explain anything to anybody else! I mean, if I could understand it, then I assumed two things: (a) that other Black people could understand it and (b) that white people, if it was any good, would understand it also.

If I could understand Emily Dickinson—you know, she wasn't writing for a Black audience or a white audience; she was writing whatever she wrote! I think if you do that, if you were some people that you're going to have in mind, it loses something, gets sort of watered down and didactic.

Midwesterners hail Morrison as an important, new Midwestern writer, and she acknowledges that fact. In Song of Solomon, for instance, "I think I call it Michigan; they sort of travel around a little bit. But all of mine start here in the Midwest!" Lorain, of course, is a real town, but Medallion isn't, "I just thought it up," and

I used something that my mother had said to me when I was young, about her living in Pittsburgh when she was first married—how all the Black people lived in the hills and all the white people lived in the valley because the land was rich. Later on, when they had the blast furnaces, all the smoke came down there, and so they sort of flipped it. I just remembered that and so I used it, a similar situation without having Pittsburgh or Bessemer furnaces.

While the author says that all her experiences in life are grist for her fictional mill, she does not write autobiographically. Her own experiences are "useful to me as fodder, but not to write about," at least up to this point in her life; "I will use what I have seen and what I have known, but it's never about my life."

She points out that instead she uses what she defines as the true "process of invention for a writer."

I can easily project into other people's circumstances and imagine how I might feel if . . . . I don't have to have done those things. So that if I'm writing of what I disapprove of, I can suspend that feeling and love those characters a lot. You know, sort of get inside the character because I sort of wonder what it would be like to be this person . . . .

The process isn't always comfortable, however, be-
cause it means that she must always be willing to "think the unthinkable."

Sometimes, it's a little frightening. I wouldn't like to know anybody like some of those people. I would be horrified. But it's safe in a book! Because I can do it there and it's real and not real, you know.

When Sula dies, I remember thinking or feeling that well, it's not a pleasant thing, but I'm willing to contemplate death. To contemplate what it must be like really to be sick and really dying, and to be interested in it while you're dying . . . which I would never do. It sounds horrible, but I'm willing to do it then, for the book; I'm not willing to do it otherwise . . .

That's what I mean when I say that one takes huge risks. Because you do start to think all the way through character and event and situation, often those not pleasant to think about, normally. To think, as in The Bluest Eye, about a little girl who is raped and left on the floor . . . I've never been raped, and I don't know what it feels like, but suppose—that's where the courage or something in the thinking process comes in.

This projection into the character comes only after the original idea or theme presents itself, "and then I have to find somebody who can work it out for me." At first glance, the themes seem varied, and certainly their treatments are, but Morrison responds in this way to a question about her basic themes:

Beauty, love . . . actually, I think, all the time that I write, I'm writing about love or its absence. Although I don't start out that way.

I thought in The Bluest Eye, that I was writing about beauty, miracles, and self-images, about the way in which people can hurt each other about whether or not one is beautiful.

In Sula, I thought I was writing about good and evil and the purposes to which they are frequently put, the way in which the community can use them.

In this last book, The Song of Solomon, about dominion (that book is about men, the leading characters are men). And I thought I was writing about the way in which men do things or see things and relate to one another.

But I think that I still write about the same thing, which is how people relate to one another and miss it or hang on to it . . . or are tenacious about love.

About love and how to survive—not to make a living—but how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something. Each one of us is in some way at some moment a victim and in no position to do a thing about it. Some child is always left unpicked up at some moment. In a world like that, how does one remain whole—is it just impossible to do that?

Because her "effort is always to push every emotion all the way to its final consequence because it interests me more that way." Morrison often has to explore violence, and she believes that possibly all of us, at least in part, are violent creatures.

We have a lot of rage, a lot of violence; it comes too easily to us. The amazing thing to me is that there is so much love also. And two things operate.

One is that with the best intentions in the world, we can do enormous harm, enormous harm. Lovers and mothers and fathers and sisters, they can hurt each other a lot.

Also, it always amazes me that sometimes, when we have a choice, we take the best one! And we do the nicer thing.

All about love . . . people do all sorts of things, under its name, under its guise. The violence is a distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do.

Good examples of that violence as distortion are found in her fiction. Eva, for instance, in Sula, could "jump out of the window for one daughter, burn up another child, all about love!" In The Bluest Eye, Cholly, Pecola's father, is a broken man, chained by poverty and circumstance, so "he might love her in the worst of all possible ways because he can't do this and he can't do that. He can't do it normally, healthily and so on. So it might end up this way [in the rape]. I want, here, to talk about how painful it is and what the painful consequences are of distortion, of love that isn't fructified, is held in, not expressed."

One of the great attractions of Sula, perhaps particularly for female readers, is its examination of a friendship between two women. On the surface, one is a good woman, Nel, and the other a bad woman, Sula. Certainly, those neat categories are the handy tags their society puts upon them. Actually, according to Morrison, Sula and Nel are the two sides to one personality, "if they were one woman, they would be complete," and the loss of their friendship, which is actually the balance wheel for each woman, is central to the book. Often, in her fiction, Morrison explores such losses because that's "my way of saying to the reader, don't let it happen!" Only at the very end of that novel, does Nel come fully to understand her loss; Morrison has understood it all along.

Love is always passing us by, always passing us by . . . and always the ego interferes: some pride, some sort of arrogance . . . and it just slips through our fingers. And there's some reason why we don't hang in with a husband or sweetheart or what have you. Something comes up, and we frequently just cannot rise above it. And I think that is simply more true than not.

Friends, husbands, sweethearts—but the problem doesn't stop there.

Parent-child relationships are the most obvious ones. Parents who simply adore their children and really and truly do want the best for them may, in fact, destroy them. They say to them, as Eva did, "Your life is not worth living." They may not kill them, as she does, but they say, "If you do not behave the way I want you to behave, then leave or get out. You must live this way." Too frequently love has to do with owning that other person.

Just as Morrison anticipates that her readers will bring their experiences to bear on her fiction, so she hopes that the experiences they live with her characters will help them "not to let it happen" in their lives. The novels, however, are never didactic; they do not preach, they teach. As she has hoped to do, she does "remove the cataracts" to show us, the people, the power we have—for evil and for good. The books work. The reason they do lies in Toni Morrison's willingness to explore the limits of emotion and then to think long and deeply about her work, to hone and polish it to a gleaming finish. To perfect it so the seams don't show.