



God Help the Child

Toni Morrison

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Spare and unsparing, *God Help the Child*—the first novel by Toni Morrison to be set in our current moment—weaves a tale about the way the sufferings of childhood can shape, and misshape, the life of the adult.

Spare and unsparing, *God Help the Child* is a searing tale about the way childhood trauma shapes and misshapes the life of the adult. At the center: a woman who calls herself Bride, whose stunning blue-black skin is only one element of her beauty, her boldness and confidence, her success in life; but which caused her light-skinned mother to deny her even the simplest forms of love until she told a lie that ruined the life of an innocent woman, a lie whose reverberations refuse to diminish ... Booker, the man Bride loves and loses, whose core of anger was born in the wake of the childhood murder of his beloved brother ... Rain, the mysterious white child, who finds in Bride the only person she can talk to about the abuse she's suffered at the hands of her prostitute mother ... and Sweetness, Bride's mother, who takes a lifetime to understand that "what you do to children matters. And they might never forget."

God Help the Child Details

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Author : Toni Morrison

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From Reader Review God Help the Child for online ebook

A says

Unfortunately, this felt more like a parody of a Toni Morrison novel rather than an actual Toni Morrison novel. (In truth, it felt like a parody of a novel, period, considering it was really more like a 90pp. novella set in big type with lots of white space to bulk it up to a \$25 hardcover.) Sadly, Morrison's larger than life emotions weren't heady, but maudlin; the usually legendary and mythic tenor of the events curdled into cliché. The writing felt not pitched in a heavenly key, but just overwrought....I mean, this is a book that includes the lines "her eyes were full of stars" and "she knew freedom wasn't really free" in completely non-ironic contexts.

That said, ANY Toni Morrison novel is still a cause for celebration. Why? Well first of all the woman is 84 but still cranks them out -- not just books but essays, reviews, speeches, etc., all with something vital to say if (as with this novel) slightly diminished means of saying it. I mean, *God Help the Child* -- she won a Nobel Prize literally a generation ago. That means, yes, there are actually people with published novels in 2015 who have never been alive in the world where the Nobel Laureates didn't include an American woman of color. How amazing is that?

More importantly, the arrival of a Toni Morrison novel means the arrival of a Toni Morrison promotional/speaking tour, and what an unmitigated joy that is. I won't link to the NYT profile of her that everyone was passing around recently, because I'm sure you read it, but I would point you to her recent writings on *The Good* (aka Altruism). This is a true American genius still writing truth to power and delivering it to us unfiltered and uncompromisingly. And no amount of clichéd writing or slight novelistic misstep can ever diminish that.

Diane S ? says

4.5 Absolutely amazing, Morrison can put a story together as very few can. Although only a short novel, so much is said, so much emotional territory is covered. When Sweetness, a light skinned black gives birth to a blue black baby, she is appalled as is her husband who quickly leaves the family. Treating her daughter, Lulu Ann roughly, she makes excuses for herself by thinking she is teaching her child how rough the world would treat her by the color of her skin. Calling herself Bride, Lulu Ann becomes a beauty and successful in business, but not so in love.

The story shows how treatment in the past follows a person into the future, the feelings of inferiority are hard to erase. How violence is dealt to the young and helpless by the very people trusted to take care and love them. This is a gritty novel, more reminiscent of her earliest novel, *Bluest Eye*. Her use of spare language, her word choices, descriptions and use of symbolism, I found awe inspiring. There is so much cause and effect in this novel, not just with the main characters but in many of the relationships found within. Although it is gritty, there are also good people, people who go out of their way to help a stranger. Atonement, is it ever possible to atone for the bad decisions of the past? Can one ever truly overcome the bad events and memories of childhood?

Thought provoking novel by an author that has truly mastered her craft. She gets it!

Amira Mahmoud says

החלטתי לכתוב את הספר הזה כי אני חושבת שיש הרבה דברים שאנחנו צריכים לדעת עליהם, ושאנחנו צריכים לדבר עליהם. זה לא סוד, אבל אנחנו לא מדברים על זה מספיק. אני רוצה לשתף אתכם בזה.

אני חושבת שזה חשוב מאוד לדבר על זה, כי זה לא רק אודותי, אלא אודות כל אחת ואחת מאתנו. יש הרבה דברים שאנחנו לא מדברים עליהם, ויש הרבה דברים שאנחנו צריכים לדבר עליהם. אני רוצה לשתף אתכם בזה, כי אני חושבת שזה חשוב מאוד. אני רוצה לשתף אתכם בזה, כי אני חושבת שזה חשוב מאוד. אני רוצה לשתף אתכם בזה, כי אני חושבת שזה חשוב מאוד.

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החלטתי.

Cat says

This novel is really not good...The reviews have been studiously polite but have been gesturing to the deficits in the book, which are considerable. I say this not to discredit Toni Morrison because I love her work. But the elements of this novel are explored with so much more nuance and terrible beauty elsewhere in her oeuvre: cruelty, sexual abuse, color consciousness, and the terrible vulnerability of children (The Bluest Eye) and the inhuman force of fire, the irresistible allure of a strong sexual connection, and the betrayal of female friendship (Sula). In an odd way, this felt like a sketch for a novel rather than an actual novel, and while it focuses on the female body as a symbol of psychic pain or community renewal (Beloved), complicating and ironizing the common representations of pregnancy as the site of restoration, drawing attention to the fact that a birth is not a happy ending but a cyclical beginning, the characterization of this central character, Bride, felt very flat to me, and the texture of the novel was not improved by turning to a different narrative center, her lover Booker. I was so hopeful about this book because I loved the excerpts I read from Morrison's recent NPR interview , but it strikes me from reading this that no one is stopping Nobel laureate Toni Morrison from publishing anything, even if it's half-baked or, in this case, merely proofing.

Raya ???? says

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Book Riot Community says

This was my first Toni Morrison. It has made me question why I never read her before now. *God Help the Child* revolves around a woman named Bride, born with blue-black skin, a sin for which her mother had no forgiveness. She and seemingly everyone she knows have faced scarring childhood trauma. Those traumas make up the central theme of the book: how our childhoods affect us for the rest of our lives. The decisions we make, the people with which we choose to associate, and our worldviews are deeply affected by our childhoods. The book is also about the lies we tell to others and ourselves to justify our actions. *God Help the Child* is short, brutal, bittersweet, and stunningly beautiful in its execution. –Chris Arnone

From Best Books We Read in January: <http://bookriot.com/2015/02/02/riot-r...>

Gregsamsa says

Warning: Strong language and adult situations

God help the child sentenced to life as a character in a Toni Morrison novel. *God help the child*. Her fans, including my own troubled self (but not the untroubled one), know that within Morrison's work there lurks the F.U.S.T.H. The FUSTH invisibly powers the outward fling of consequence, or it magnetically calls actors back to its charged core. *The Fucked-Up Shit That Happened*. *The Fucked-Up Shit that Happened* finds itself inscribed upon her characters long before we find out what it was that happened, and just how fucked up it was.

Polite readers made no mention of how polite reviewers made little mention of her previous novel *Home*, which is good because it wasn't very good. It pains me to say that this one isn't either, which may have pain-related causes as Morrison endures chronic back ache such that she cannot stand for more than six minutes and she does not take pain killers. Surgery fixed it, but only for eight months.

Toni Morrison writes mystery novels. There are no detectives, investigators, trails of clues, nor any of the trappings common to that genre, but there is almost always a secret which is slowly revealed as the plot winds its way through the lives of those who have been touched by the secret, which is always a crime in some sense.

This time Morrison pulls a twist on the FUSTH, but it's there anyway, in a way, with secondary versions of the central wrongdoing promiscuously distributed throughout the story and the characters' memories. Less central characters are given their own personal taste of the FUSTH aside from the central FUSTH which might not be the kind of FUSTH we originally suspect. Yes, like mysteries, most Morrison novels can be only hazily described without spoilers.

When it comes to touchy subjects Morrison is never afraid to totally GO THERE, but in this book she doesn't do much with it once she's there. This book opens with the can of worms of intra-racial racism, or colorism, dramatizing the disdain some light-skinned African Americans have for darker-skinned people. Intensifying the touchiness is the fact that it is a mother's disdain for her daughter. Mom, or Sweetness, is quite unsweet in her pride over the fact that her own grandmother was so light-skinned that she was able to abandon her

family and "pass" among white folks with a new improved life. Having an onyx baby prompts Sweetness to blame her husband's genes while he in turn suspects infidelity. But this is only tangentially related to the FUSTH.

But the strikingly dark daughter, Bride, has the last laugh: she becomes a successful executive in a cosmetics company guiding her own product line, *You, Girl*, on top of being so gorgeous she turns heads everywhere she goes. But in Morrison mysteries even the one who laughs last does not laugh long. Neither does this issue of skin shade last long, as its only purpose is to sharpen Bride's need for parental approval before the topic is dismissed as no longer necessary while we move from a Toni Morrison novel into Terry McMillan territory: Bride's first priority is to get her man back, to resume the vague and sketchy relationship she had with a man we barely know because Bride barely knows him and this weakness in the motivation machinery is spotted in many other characters' movements throughout. I kept asking myself *Why are these people doing these things?*

The only thing that is clear is that little of it has to do with either the FUSTH nor race, really, and the bafflement this inspires is not helped by some Laura Esquivel lite magical realism whose pat symbolism makes you pray the events are subjective, the product of a character's superficial mind steeped in the shallow waters of cosmetics marketing. Lesson: that's not deeply connected to authentic *life*. But what is?

In an amusing reversal of stories in which shallow materialistic white people are taught valuable lessons by magical black people who are more closely connected to Earth, Life, and Nature, Bride receives some rural therapy from some authentic-life whites who live not only off the grid but in an 1800's novel, the kind where if you are sick or injured as a guest somewhere, you just have to live there for a couple months. It seems almost magical that one could do this and get to know the hosts no better than on day one; they remain distant and yet therapeutic as they earnestly work through a list of homey authentic chores, becoming a quaint romantic picture of country goodness (instead of people). This is only funny with some critical distance, however, as in the novel it is utterly deadpan.

There are some bald plot problems I won't go into, ones at the quotidian logistical level, that made me wonder if Morrison's editors are too deferential. Same goes for some structural awkwardness, such as how we're introduced to a new character and her back-story begins less than twenty pages from the end of the novel, which we realize is offered in hopes that this will make us care what happens to this new person. I didn't, as the filling out of her character felt like an afterthought, and what happens to her reads like an attempt to heavy the ending with a dollop more pathos.

On just the level of plain craft, this reader found Morrison's last two novels a steep step below her previous work, and the fact that this may be because of real-life physical pain contains for me more real pathos than her last two books combined. So, in a different way, this book reminds us of something we get from so much of her writing: sometimes life really sucks.

Roxane says

Read this in one breath. Really lovely novel about how a young woman made a desperate choice to be loved by her mother, how that choice would shape her life, and how she was able to overcome a mistake to become her own woman. I am especially marveling at the novel's structure and how it all comes together at the end. I was both surprised and satisfied by the ending. This is just an excellent novel.

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Suzanne says

Writing this review has shifted my rated from 3-4 stars, to 5.

What an eclectic book, what an interesting writer! This is my first foray into Toni Morrison books. I listened to the audio, narrated by the author. She has a dreamy voice, I was initially feeling a little mesmerised and sleepy, but decided to enjoy the story telling, by the creator, it is real. Her words pack a punch at every turn, every statement is strong and full bodied. The process of writing this story must have been exhausting.

Tough are these themes of childhood neglect, abuse and childhood misery. We are meant to cherish our young, aren't we? So many bad things happen to our babies, it is depressing, but the author uses this to make us think.

'Bride' has chosen this as her name, is a young and exquisite beautiful blue black woman who has seen too much, experienced too much and has lived without all the things we take for granted. This is really heavy, it's hard for me to put into words a summary, I don't summarise my books here on Goodreads, anyway. Gosh, I didn't even know the term blue black – I had to look it up, and the images I saw took my breath away. I could envision Bride to be extraordinary.

Bride shines in every way – her looks, her white clothes and shoes against her amazing skin colour, an amazing career. She has succeeded in this respect, but what she has endured in her short few years is heartbreaking. She will touch the life of the reader. Bride only ever wanted to be loved, accepted; even touched by her mother.

Read this book. I am now off to read more about the author and see if I can get a glimpse into where all these complexities come from if can, even in a small way.

Barry Pierce says

Everybody bow down, Toni Morrison still reigns. In this short novel, we meet Bride. A young woman who, as a child, testified in a court case which led to the imprisonment of an alleged child abuser. Twenty years later, Bride tries to make peace with the woman whom she sent to prison. I'll stop there and allow you to read the rest of the novel.

Morrison imbues this novel with her renowned mastery of prose which allows the reader to sweep through this novel in only a sitting or two. This novel is a well-wound timepiece with every cog (characters, narrative, emotion) working off each other in perfect harmony and synchronisation, in the end altogether forming a beautiful work.

God Help the Child is, thus far, my favourite new release of 2015. Short, succinct, savage. It shows that, even since *The Bluest Eye* was written 45 years ago, Morrison has never lost a single gram of genius, intellect or bite.

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Will Byrnes says

No lonesome wandering child with a fishing pole passed by and glanced at the adults in the dusty gray car. But if one had, he or she might have noticed the pronounced smiles of the couple, how dreamy their eyes were, but would not care a bit what caused that shine of happiness.

A child. New life. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath. So they believe.

The children in Toni Morrison's novel can use all the help they can get, whether from God or some other source. Lula Ann Bridewell was not what her high-yellow parents had expected:

She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black...Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that color...I hate to say it, but from the very beginning in the maternity ward, Lula Ann embarrassed me.

Toni Morrison said in an interview, "For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together." In this instance it is about a very black woman who cannot.

While she may be a successful cosmetics pro, beautiful, successful, rising in the world, we meet the adult Lula Ann, who has erased the rest of her name and now calls herself by the mononym "Bride," as she is unceremoniously dumped by her boyfriend, *The One*, Booker Starbern, who announces, "You're not the woman I want," before exiting to the percussive accompaniment of a slammed door. How this came to be, and Bride's quest to figure out why it did, provide the foundation to which the rest of the narrative elements are added.

Bride has a bit of a tough go, as her appreciation for people and relationships is only skin deep. She tells of her Diet Coke-like sex life, "deceptively sweet minus nutrition." She tries to blow off her dumping,

Well, anyway it was nothing like those double-page spreads in fashion magazines, you know, couples standing half-naked in surf, looking so fierce and downright mean, their sexuality like lightning and the sky going dark to show off the shine of their skin. I love those ads. But our affair didn't even measure up to any old R-&-B song-some tune with a beat to generate fever.

but fails at that. In fact the departure of Booker sparks a physical demise for Bride, well, a magical-realist retreat that no one else seems to see, as she progressively devolves back to a child, losing her ear-piercings, pubic hair, weight, sense of taste, menstrual cycle and breasts.

Toni Morrison - from *The Guardian*

Bride's erstwhile, and very secretive bf, Booker, has issues of his own. (*He especially liked her lack of interest in his personal life.*) Where Bride is totally focused on the surface of things, Booker, who plays jazz, hides behind his intellect, applying himself to the study of the root of all evil, but never really freeing himself to become an entire person. He carries a burden of rage from his childhood that keeps him from being his own person. Only if Bride and Booker can build themselves up to actual three dimensional people, by

looking beyond their own skins to consider the feelings of others, can they have any hope of anything more from life than ephemeral pleasures. Only then can they truly connect.

Much of *God Help the Child* focuses on children, how they are treated, the long-term impact of that treatment, on themselves and on others. Childhood here is a particularly fraught state. Lula Ann (Bride) is almost shunned by her own mother, who won't even allow her to call her "Mama," insisting that she call her "Sweetness" instead, lest people on the street know for sure that someone that dark came from someone that light. As a child she witnesses an act of child abuse. Another character loses a relation to a child abuser, and encounters a school-yard flasher as an adult. Bride had falsely testified against an allegedly abusive teacher, done to gain at least some acceptance from her mother, so children are capable of inflicting harm as well as receiving it. Another child was prostituted by her mother, and a serial abuser, "the nicest man in the world," is reported to have preyed on many. One might be inclined to wonder a bit at the Cabot Cove-like concentration of awfulness on display here, even if much of it is by reference.

Thematically, there is a lot in here about erasure, not only Bride's Richard Matheson-reminiscent fairy tale reduction, some of it involving what appears to be a magic razor, Sweetness erasing Lula Ann as much as possible, Sofia, the convicted molester, doing her best to erase Bride from her life, as Bride had attempted to erase her guilt for what she had done, and it can be no accident that Bride is the designer of cosmetics, and even thinks about people in terms of how the right makeup can erase their flaws.

The pages are damp with mentions of precipitation. It rains on Bride the day after Booker leaves. Booker is rained on when he leaves a family gathering in a huff. A child of a prostitute is found while on the street in the rain, and rain moistens one of the most beautiful passages in the book, as Booker celebrates seeing his Galatea for the first time:

The sun still blazed so the raindrops falling from the baby-blue sky were like crystal breaking into specks of light on the pavement. He decided to play his trumpet alone in the rain anyway, knowing that no pedestrians would stop to listen; rather they closed umbrellas as they rushed down the stairs to the trains. Still in thrall to the sheer beauty of the girl he had seen, he put the trumpet to his lips. What emerged was music he had never played before. Low, muted tones held long, too long as the strains floated through drops of rain.

There are plenty more passages that ripple with poetic feeling. And there are some subsidiary characters who brighten up the scene. A fifty-something hippie couple seemed like magical forest dwellers, an epitome of innocence and goodness, with maybe a touch of Tom Bombadil and even Bjorn the Berserker. Booker's aunt, Queen, is a delight, vivacious, colorful, and very interesting, worthy of an entire book just on her alone. The rescued daughter of a prostitute is fascinating as well.

God Help the Child is a rarity, in that it is a Toni Morrison novel set in the present. Her eleventh novel is a spare one, at 177 pages, similar in girth to Morrison's previous novels, *Home*, which weighed in a very novella-like 147 pages and *A Mercy*, another slim volume, at 167 pages. Not that Morrison is given to producing tomes, but her books these days seem on the thin side. A larger frame might have allowed her a bit more space in which to give us a bit more. I am reminded, though, of Lincoln's response when asked about the proper length of a man's legs, he said "they ought to be long enough to reach from his body to the ground." I expect that the proper size of a Toni Morrison story is the number of pages she needs to say what she has to say. She has said she is, "writing less in order to say more." A little Toni Morrison goes a long way.

The author is in her 80s now. While *God* may have been asleep as the wheel when most of the children in

this tale suffered what they suffered, maybe God can help the author, at something she is most definitely inclined to do, keep writing until her last breath, and help push that day far off into the future. In this way God will also be helping the reader .

You will need no assistance enjoying *God Help the Child*. While I would not rank it with her recognized classics, like *Sula* and *Beloved*, even a lesser Toni Morrison book is better than most of what is out there.

Review posted – August 7, 2015

Publication date – April 21, 2015

EXTRA STUFF

Morrison's Facebook page

Interviews

--- GR interview by Catherine Elsworth

---Video interview at the 92nd Street Y

--- NPR's Fresh Air, with Terry Gross

--- The Paris Review – with Elissa Schappell

Mohamed Al says

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## ?Literary fiction vs popular fiction

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## Cole says

When I took a grad school class on Toni Morrison, I started a (pretentious, I know) tradition of 9-word reviews of her work. Look, I was young and she had written 9 books at the time.

Anyway, I'll do the same here:

Everybody is fucked up. There's usually a good reason.

Then I'll cheat and add that Toni Morrison is a national treasure and I'm so thankful to have her books in my life.

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## Ron Charles says

Last month while accepting a lifetime achievement award from the National Book Critics Circle, Toni Morrison noted that back in 1970 when she published her debut novel, “The Bluest Eye,” “the reception was slight, indifferent.”

Forty-five years and one Nobel Prize later, the reception has been entirely redecorated. Her 1987 classic, “Beloved,” is justly inscribed in the literary history of the 20th century; her name is regularly invoked along with Faulkner and Ellison. Her new novel, “God Help the Child,” is thundering off the press with 200,000 copies.

Now 84, when no one would blame her for concentrating on ovations and grandchildren, Morrison shows no signs of slowing her steady, productive pace. Her last three novels have been slim but formally daring and thematically ambitious. Because her latest work offers curious reflections of where she began in “The Bluest Eye,” it’s tempting to read “God Help the Child” as a capstone of her jeweled career. Once again, we have a young woman whose life is overdetermined by the pigment of her skin in a culture torn with sexual violence.

But unfortunately, “God Help the Child” carries only a faint echo of that earlier novel’s power. . . .

*To read the rest of this review, go to The Washington Post:*  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

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### 3.5 stars

**“No matter how hard we try to ignore it, the mind always knows truth and wants clarity.”**– Toni Morrison, *God Help The Child*

It took me a while to write this review, mainly because I was trying to find the right words. I’ve read most of Morrison’s books. There was something about it that did not feel very much like her other books. That’s not to say an author has to stick to one writing style but there were some parts of the book that caught me off-guard. Structurally this felt quite different from her other books, with more fast-paced sections, and a couple of loose ends, though it wasn’t that evident at first.

The novella focuses on Bride, a woman with blue black skin. Ignored and neglected by her mother, and not shown any love because of her black skin, she was accepted as a successful adult in the beauty industry:

**“I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it. I have to say, forcing those tormentors—the real ones and others like them– to drool with envy when they see me is more than payback. It’s glory.”**

At first I thought this book was going along the lines of “The Bluest Eye” in that it discusses colourism. Regardless of how often I read about colourism, it always surprises me how prevalent it can be, and how it can, in this case, stop a light-skinned black woman from showing any love to her dark-skinned daughter. I came across this painting the other day, *A Redenção de Cam*, by Modesto Brocos, which summarizes how worrying colourism is: ([https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Redem...](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Redem...))

Yet, colourism wasn’t a theme that was as developed as I expected it would be. Perhaps it’s because the book was a pretty fast-paced book.

Despite this book not being as strong as Morrison’s others, I still quite liked it. I especially liked the conversation about how our childhood can haunt us and can often play a huge role in our adult life:

**“Each will cling to a sad little story of hurt and sorrow– some long-ago trouble and pain life dumped on their pure and innocent selves. And each one will rewrite that story forever, knowing the plot, guessing the theme, inventing its meaning and dismissing its origin. What a waste.”**

The main characters both carry burdens from their childhood, burdens they haven’t properly acknowledged. For example, Booker, Bride’s boyfriend, looks to his intelligence as a way of not confronting his childhood trauma. Yet it causes problems:

**“I risk nothing. I sit on a throne and identify signs of imperfections in others. I’ve been charmed by my own intelligence and the moral positions I’ve taken, along with the insolence that accompanies them. But where is the brilliant research, the enlightening books, the masterpieces I used to dream of producing? Nowhere. Instead I write notes about the shortcomings of others. Easy. So easy.”**

I wish this had been longer, or at least that some of the loose ends had been completed. I still had many questions!

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## **Teresa says**

This book was sitting half-read in a Kansas City hotel room, while I was visiting the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum. After finishing the novel, I reflected on one of the characters' saying that race doesn't exist, that it's not a scientific but a social construct and even more so an economic engine; and I was reminded of the museum, where these same ideas are so very apparent.

Though the main female character is gawked at for both her blue-black skin and her beauty, race is not the novel's main theme. It is the sexual abuse -- rape -- of children, of all colors, by adults -- parents, teachers, strangers, the man-next-door -- and how that shapes and informs every single day of the surviving victims, even the indirect ones.

They will blow it, she thought. Each will cling to a sad little story of hurt and sorrow — some long-ago trouble and pain life dumped on their pure and innocent selves. And each one will rewrite that story forever, knowing the plot, guessing the theme, inventing its meaning and dismissing its origin.

I read Toni Morrison not only for her themes but also her language; and while this is not the same prose of her masterpieces, it contains startling imagery and beautiful lyricism, especially in the last section. Surprisingly enough, a passage of fire in the latter reminded me of the start of the last section of Caldwell's Tobacco Road.

While not directly stated, this novel shows that everyone knows someone affected by the crime of sexual child abuse -- even if they don't know that they do. As Booker says: “Now five people know. The boy, the freak, your mother, you and now me. Five is better than two but it should be five thousand.”

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