



Biography of Toni Morrison: American writer Toni Morrison (born Chloe Ardelia Wofford) became the first black female editor in fiction in the late 1960s at Random House in NYC. In the late 1970s and 1980s Morrison developed her reputation as an author. Morrison’s works are praised for writing the Black American experience and the harsh consequences of racism in the United States. Her 1977 published novel *Song of Solomon* brought her national attention. The novel won her the National Book Critics Circle Award. She won the Pulitzer Prize for her 1987-published novel *Beloved*. In 1993, Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Morrison was honored with the National Book Foundation’s Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 1966. In the same year, she was selected for the Jefferson Lecture, the US federal government’s highest honor for achievement in the humanities. On May 29, 2012, President Barack Obama presented Toni Morrison with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She won the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction in the year 2016. In 2020, she was inducted into the National Women’s Hall of Fame.

Early Life and Education

Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio. She was the second of four children of Ramah and George Wofford. Morrison was born in a working-class Black family. When Toni Morrison was just two years old, the landlord set their house on fire while they were home, as her parents were not able to pay the rent. Her family however laughed at the landlord calling it a “bizarre form of evil” rather than falling into despair. The writer later said this response of her family demonstrated how to keep calm and integrity in your life in the face of “monumental crudeness”. At the age of 12, she became a catholic and took the baptismal name Anthony, which led to her nickname Toni.

Toni Morrison’s parents instilled in her a sense of language and heritage through telling traditional African-American ghost stories, and folktales, and singing songs. She was also an avid reader as a child and her favorite authors were Leo Tolstoy and Jane Austen. Morrison attended Lorain High School and she was on the debate team and drama club.



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In 1949, Morrison enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C. During this time she encountered racially segregated buses and restaurants. After graduating in 1953 with a B.A. degree in English, she enrolled at Cornell University for a Master's Degree in 1955. The title of her master's thesis was "Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's treatment of the alienated." From 1955 to 1957, Morrison taught English at Texas Southern University and then at Howard University for the next seven years. In 1965, she began working as an editor for L.W. Singer. After two years she began working as the senior editor in the fiction department at Random House in NYC.

Personal Life of Toni Morrison

From 1957 to 1964 while teaching at Howard University, she met Jamaican architect Harold Morrison. They got married in 1958. In 1961, their first son Harold Ford was born. In 1964 while she was pregnant with their second son Slade Kevin, Morrison and her husband got divorced. Slade Kevin was born in 1965. Morrison moved with her sons as her career took her to different places. On December 22, 2010, Slade Kevin died of pancreatic cancer.



Works

Toni Morrison played a significant role in bringing Black Literature into the mainstream. The first book she worked on was *Contemporary African Literature* (1972), a collection that included work by Nigerian writers Athol Fugard, Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka. She fostered a new generation of Afro-American writers including figures like Angela Davis, Huey Newton, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gayl Jones. In 1975 she published the autobiography of boxing champion Muhammad Ali titled *The Greatest: My Own Story*. She published the work of Henry Dumas, a little-known novelist who was shot to death in 1968 by a transit officer in the NYC Subway.

Toni Morrison had begun writing fiction as a part of an informal group of writers at Howard University. The group met to discuss their work. Morrison attended one meeting with a short story focusing on a Black girl who longed to have blue eyes. She later developed the short story into her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. During this time she was raising two children and used to get up at 4 am every morning to write. In 1970 when Morrison was 39 *The Bluest Eye* was published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Morrison's second novel *Sula* was published in 1973. The novel was nominated for the National Book Award. It focuses on the friendship between two Black women. In 1977, Morrison's third novel *Song of Solomon* was published. It won the National Book Critics Circle Award. The novel follows the life of Macon from birth to adulthood, as he discovers his heritage. *Song of Solomon* brought Morrison national acclaim. It was a main selection of the Book of the Month Club, the first novel by a Black writer to be so chosen since Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Her next novel *Tar Baby* (1981) follows a looks-obsessed fashion model Jadine. Jadine falls in love with Son. Son is a penniless drifter who feels at ease with being Black.



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In 1987, Toni Morrison published her most celebrated work, *Beloved*. The story was inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved African-American woman. Garner escaped slavery but she was pursued by slave hunters. After returning she killed her two-year-old daughter, but she was captured before she tried to kill herself. The novel imagines the dead baby, *Beloved*, as a ghost haunting her mother and family. *Jazz* (1992), the second novel of the *Beloved* trilogy is about a love triangle during the Harlem Renaissance in New York City. The third novel of the trilogy *Paradise* was published in 1997. It is about the citizens of an all-Black town. The following year the writer was on the cover of *Time* magazine. She was the second female writer of fiction and the second Black writer of fiction to appear in the magazine.

In 1993, Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. She was the first Black woman of any nationality to win the prize. In her acceptance speech, Morrison said - “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.”



Last Days of Toni Morrison

Morrison's second son Slade died of pancreatic cancer in 2010 at the age of 45. During this time she was working on her novel *Home*, and she stopped writing for two years. She published *Home* in 2012. In May 2011, Toni Morrison received an Honorary Doctor of Letters from Rutgers University–New Brunswick. In the same year, she worked with opera director Peter Sellars taking a fresh look at William Shakespeare's *Othello*. Morrison, Peter, and singer-songwriter Rokia Traore focused on *Othello*'s wife Desdemona, and her African nursemaid Barbary. In 2012, Oberlin College became the home base of the Toni Morrison Society. Toni Morrison published her eleventh novel *God Help the Child* in 2015.

At the age of 88, Toni Morrison died on August 5, 2019, in The Bronx, NYC from complications of pneumonia. On November 21, 2019, a memorial tribute was held for the late writer at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. In this memorial, she was eulogized by Oprah Winfrey, Michael Ondaatje, Angela Davis, Fran Lebowitz, David Remnick, Edwidge Danticat, and more. Jazz saxophonist David Murray performed a musical tribute.

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