

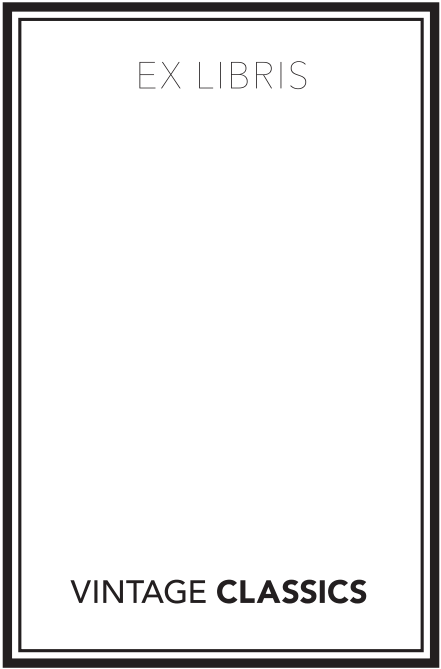


THE BLUEST EYE



TONI MORRISON

With an introduction by CANDICE CARTY-WILLIAMS



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TONI MORRISON

Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. She was the author of many novels, including *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, *Paradise* and *Love*. She received the National Book Critics Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize for her fiction and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honour, in 2012 by Barack Obama. Toni Morrison died on 5 August 2019 at the age of eighty-eight.

‘Toni Morrison makes me believe in God. She makes me believe in a divine being, because luck and genetics don’t seem to come close to explaining her’

Guardian

‘When Morrison writes at her best, you can feel the workings of history through her prose’

Hilary Mantel, *Spectator*

‘The nearest thing America has to a national novelist’

New York Times

‘Toni Morrison is not just an important contemporary novelist but a major figure in our national literature’

New York Review of Books

‘I imagine if our greatest American novelist, William Faulkner, were alive today he would herald Toni Morrison’s emergence as a kindred spirit... Discovering a writer like Toni Morrison is the rarest of pleasures’

Washington Post

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TONI MORRISON

The Bluest Eye

WITH A FOREWORD AND AFTERWORD BY

Toni Morrison

AND

AN INTRODUCTION BY

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*To the two who gave me life
and the one who made me free*

INTRODUCTION

Black girlhood is hopelessly fragile, but so rarely understood or accepted as such. From a young age, Black girls are exposed to a life that is raw, unrelenting and unaccepting. So *rarely* do Black women get the chance to experience childhood. There's something about the so-called strength of a Black woman that supposedly judders to life when we're old enough to talk. We end up clinging helplessly to this myth of indestructibility, often burying our own fears, our own voices and our own vulnerabilities, instead covering the soft parts of ourselves that need to grow and be nourished with some sort of impenetrable emotional armour. The way that this world works, we never have the time to sit with what it was to be a child. To understand what it is to be carefree. To be able to grow, slowly, into a version of ourselves that knows what it is to be beautiful, to have the space and the support to be fragile. From birth, it seems that our function is to be strong, and to be a set of shoulders to carry the burdens of those around us.

The idea that Black women are strong is a mistruth. That we know and believe in, resolutely and firmly, of our own beauty, our value, our virtues and our abilities, is a mistruth.

At its core, *The Bluest Eye* is a novel about the mistruths that we internalise. It is about many things thematically – poverty, Blackness, sexual violence, racism – but its fragmented style and its refusal to be chronological or easy to read builds a richer picture than the one we could see if any of these themes were apart from each other. What this is saying to us, really, is that we, as people, are made up of just as many parts. We wouldn't be who we were if not for our traumas, our dark thoughts, our fears. Of course there are lighter parts to us. There is joy, and there is happiness. There is love, and there is care. But often, all of these parts of us are grappling with each other, fighting for space in our tired minds. And more often than not, fear wins out.

The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison's debut novel, first published in 1970 and set in her hometown of Lorain, Ohio, was not a commercial success at the time. In fact, talking to *Interview* magazine, Morrison noted that the Black community hated it. Is this because Morrison holds nothing back when it comes to shining a light on the ways that Blackness, and the ideals within it, can eat itself up? Is it because she was unafraid to present Blackness as a twisted, complicated and painful thing, rather than celebrate it? Is it because Toni Morrison, in *The Bluest Eye*, dared to explore Black hate, as opposed to Black love?

Colourism, discrimination based on skin tone, is one of the biggest disappointments within the Black community. It takes us way back to the days of slavery, which weren't as long ago as the history books would have us think. The lighter you were in skin tone, the more likely you were to be favoured by your white owners. This concept of being Black, but still being close to whiteness, is one that has been passed down through

decades of inherited trauma, and is still as alive and as pervasive today. It made its way into how we see each other as Black people, and the value we place on ourselves. A higher price for a lighter tone.

It's through this ideal that Percola Breedlove, the central character of *The Bluest Eye*, operates. Percola is a young dark-skinned Black girl who longs for blue eyes. These blue eyes, she says, set against her dark skin, will make her more beautiful. This is the first mistruth Percola understands, and one that she lives by. This lack of understanding of her own value, this fundamental disruption of her ego and shattering of her self esteem, leaves her wide open for the internalised rejection that marks her life. So insidious, so deeply entrenched is this idea that proximity to whiteness will 'help' her, it eventually drives her to madness, living deep in her soul and permeating her psyche.

The second mistruth that *The Bluest Eye* shatters is that the family home is a place of safety, and of love. The family home that Percola comes from does not exist. It was burned down by her alcoholic and abusive father. The family structure that Percola comes from also does not exist. Her parents would fight, verbally and physically. The innate safety and love that a family should give Percola especially does not exist, which we understand early on in the novel when the father of young Percola's child is revealed to us, cruelly and almost casually. Percola's family home is not the only one we see. Percola is taken in by the MacTeer family after her own home is destroyed, sent up in flames along with her childhood and innocence. Fostered by their parents, Percola shares a bed with sisters Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, both as young, but both only

slightly less exposed to the mental, physical and sexual violence that will irrevocably change her. The MacTeer family life is also not perfect, and Claudia and Frieda, aged nine and ten respectively, quickly lose a view of life through childhood eyes along with Percola. The conversations around poverty and its repercussions in the home leave them with a feeling of helplessness and impotence.

A third mistruth Morrison tackles is that hard work equals success, and that the African-American dream is a real thing. In this novel, each day is a small battle as the characters live in poverty, exchanging hard manual labour for a pittance, or trading sex for enough money to keep a roof over their heads. Alcoholism is an escape. The abhorrent crime that comes from this need to dull the pain of life is swept under the carpet. Life continues. No reports are given, no arrests are made. What Morrison asks us to do, in *The Bluest Eye*, is to never judge. Instead she requests that we observe the person, we observe their upbringing, we observe their surroundings, and we take in the fragmented and painful lives that have forced them to settle in their final, sometimes destructive form. What the characters in *The Bluest Eye* are doing is surviving.

Morrison is a master when it comes to identity. When we think about the ways that we have to bend and contort ourselves, sometimes quite literally, into the mould that society has set out for us, is it not horrifying? Is it not truly frightening to have to go back into ourselves, to look at that inner child, and to see what she was exposed to? What are the pieces of life that formed our identity? What mistruths were we told? Were we told that we shouldn't wear our hair in certain ways, for

fear of standing out? Or were we told that the more coarse our hair was, the less pretty it was? Were we told that the lighter our skin was, the better looking we were? Were we told that it's better to have a cute, button nose, rather than a broad one? Were we told that the slimmer we were, the more we might be found attractive, or that somehow, we would simply be a better person if we had curves, but only in all the right places?

Living in Western society, a horrible imprinting happens to Black women as we grow older. Unseen scars are left on us every time we're shown, and told, that we aren't beautiful. These unseen scars are re-opened when it comes to love, friendships, relationships. Add to that in this modern age of social media, where false and uniform ideals of beauty are forced down our throats daily. How does one grow up being told how ugly, how undesirable, the mainstream finds them, and not reject themselves? What kind of internal work is constantly being done so as not to wish for blue eyes, for lighter skin, for straighter hair, for a slim, small physique?

Morrison forces us to think about the unattainable and unfair ideals of beauty, and how they reign supreme, even in today's society. What is beauty? What does it mean? How does it add to our value? What Morrison is asking, through Percola, is how the idea of *finally* attaining what we have been told is true beauty can remove us, by elevation, from a life that doesn't seem to be enough. Percola Breedlove believes that if her eyes were blue, she would then finally be beautiful. That she would then finally be loved. That her troubles would go away, and that her identity would be unshaken, true and accepted, in a life that had refused to be kind to her. And the main mistruth

here is that life is ever kind. It's not. But there is kindness within it, and within acceptance of self, even when the world is telling you that there is always a way for you to be better.

Candice Carty-Williams

2022

FOREWORD

There can't be anyone, I am sure, who doesn't know what it feels like to be disliked, even rejected, momentarily or for sustained periods of time. Perhaps the feeling is merely indifference, mild annoyance, but it may also be hurt. It may even be that some of us know what it is like to be actually hated – hated for things we have no control over and cannot change. When this happens, it is some consolation to know that the dislike or hatred is unjustified – that you don't deserve it. And if you have the emotional strength and/or support from family and friends, the damage is reduced or erased. We think of it as the stress (minor or disabling) that is part of life as a human.

When I began writing *The Bluest Eye*, I was interested in something else. Not resistance to the contempt of others, ways to deflect it, but the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident. I knew that some victims of powerful self-loathing turn out to be dangerous, violent, reproducing the enemy who has humiliated them over and over. Others surrender their identity; melt into a structure that delivers the strong persona they lack. Most others, however, grow beyond it. But there are some who

collapse, silently, anonymously, with no voice to express or acknowledge it. They are invisible. The death of self-esteem can occur quickly, easily in children, before their ego has 'legs,' so to speak. Couple the vulnerability of youth with indifferent parents, dismissive adults, and a world, which, in its language, laws, and images, re-enforces despair, and the journey to destruction is sealed.

The project, then, for this, my first book, was to enter the life of the one least likely to withstand such damaging forces because of youth, gender, and race. Begun as a bleak narrative of psychological murder, the main character could not stand alone since her passivity made her a narrative void. So I invented friends, classmates, who understood, even sympathized, with her plight, but had the benefit of supportive parents and a feistiness all their own. Yet they were helpless as well. They could not save their friend from the world. She broke.

The origin of the novel lay in a conversation I had with a childhood friend. We had just started elementary school. She said she wanted blue eyes. I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish. The sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy, and I faked it for her, but, astonished by the desecration she proposed, I 'got mad' at her instead.

Until that moment I had seen the pretty, the lovely, the nice, the ugly, and although I had certainly used the word 'beautiful,' I had never experienced its shock – the force of which was equaled by the knowledge that no one recognized it, not even, or especially, the one who possessed it.

It must have been more than the face I was examining: the silence of the street in the early afternoon, the light, the

atmosphere of confession. In any case it was the first time I knew beautiful. Had imagined it for myself. Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could *do*.

The Bluest Eye was my effort to say something about that; to say something about why she had not, or possibly ever would have, the experience of what she possessed and also why she prayed for so radical an alteration. Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later, I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale? The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her.

The reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties stirred these thoughts, made me think about the necessity for the claim. Why, although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation to exist? These are not clever questions. But in 1962 when I began this story, and in 1965 when it began to be a book, the answers were not as obvious to me as they quickly became and are now. The assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/ racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze. I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female. In trying to dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause, I chose a unique situation, not a representative one. The extremity of

Pecola's case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family – unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator's. But singular as Pecola's life was, I believed some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls. In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to. That is, I did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse.

One problem was centering the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. My solution – break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader – seemed to me a good idea, the execution of which does not satisfy me now. Besides, it didn't work: many readers remain touched but not moved.

The other problem, of course, was language. Holding the despising glance while sabotaging it was difficult. The novel tried to hit the raw nerve of racial self-contempt, expose it, then soothe it not with narcotics but with language that replicated the agency I discovered in my first experience of beauty. Because that moment was so racially infused (my revulsion at what my school friend wanted: very blue eyes in a very black skin; the harm she was doing to *my* concept of the beautiful), the struggle was for writing that was indisputably black. I don't yet know quite what that is, but neither that nor the attempts to disqualify an effort to find out keeps me from trying to pursue it.

My choices of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial), my reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture, my effort to effect immediate co-conspiracy and intimacy (without any distancing, explanatory fabric), as well as my attempt to shape a silence while breaking it are attempts to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black-American culture into a language worthy of the culture.

Thinking back now on the problems expressive language presented to me, I am amazed by their currency, their tenacity. Hearing 'civilized' languages debase humans, watching cultural exorcisms debase literature, seeing oneself preserved in the amber of disqualifying metaphors – I can say that my narrative project is as difficult today as it was then.

Toni Morrison

The Bluest Eye

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play.

Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy see jane she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with jane see the cat it goes meow-meow come and play come play with jane the kitten will not play see mother mother is very nice mother